Introduction

It is reasonable to ask why anyone should care about the state and fate of Buddhism in contemporary Japan. An obvious response is to point out that like Daoism in China, Christianity in Europe, or Islam in North Africa, understanding the influences of diverse Buddhist traditions upon Japanese culture and society helps us read an entire civilization. From beliefs about causality to the spiritual and social dimensions of human existence, from aesthetic sensibilities to orientations to the natural world, one would be challenged to find aspects of Japanese culture that have not been shaped by some interaction with Buddhism. This alone invites attention to the stories of Buddhist priests and temples that are dramatic and rich with significance, and that, though sometimes ridden with conflict, are emblematic of a particular way of being religious in the world.

Buddhism in Japan also gives us a stellar example of what happens when deeply embedded religious traditions confront the dynamics of rapid social change that characterize this late modern period. From 1975 to 2010 Japan had the second largest GNP in the world and one of the highest rates of literacy and college graduates, yet its citizens continue to interact with cultural and religious traditions going back centuries, some over a thousand years. Curiosity about the negotiation and tension of Buddhism’s relationship with society leads us to ask how (and whether) it still shapes and informs people’s lives in meaningful ways.

One might also wonder about the social impact, in a small island nation, of roughly 205,000 Buddhist priests administering over 76,000 registered temples. What contributions have they made to one of the most productive and innovative societies in the world? A person encountering Japan for the first time might infer from the impressive social presence and historical legacy of Buddhism that it plays a substantial role in society, influencing the perspectives, values, and worldviews of its citizens. After all, the Japanese language is permeated with terms and expressions having their origin in Buddhism. Influences are also found in art, philosophy, landscapes and gardens, cuisine, and architecture, as well as social etiquette and bodily comportment. Nearly every museum of art and a great many temples are home to precious religious artifacts classified as “national treasures” (kokubō) or “important cultural properties” (jūyō bunkazai). A nine-week exhibit of seventh-century Buddhist sculptures drew nearly 1
million people to the Tokyo National Museum in 2009. Even a majority of Japan’s World Heritage Sites relate to temples.²

When one looks more closely at the association between Buddhism and contemporary Japanese society, initial impressions are complicated by any number of surprising discoveries. It quickly becomes clear that Japan’s Buddhist temples represent not uniformity but a great and sometimes perplexing diversity. Some 157 denominations and sects advocate their own traditions in ways that have served elite interests as often as they have catered to the religious needs of common people. Enhancing political power and the legitimacy of rulers has often been as important to Buddhist institutions and priests as their religious practices, in part because they rarely had the means to resist the demands of powerful warlords. Whether for a mountain ascetic seeking enlightenment among misty peaks, a poor farmer praying for the health of his child, or rituals that protect the imperial court, Japanese Buddhism has for centuries provided religious value and significance to many segments of the population.

Perhaps the most disquieting news about Buddhism in Japan is the impact of money on the operation of temples past and present. Visitors may not want to consider cash flow and cost-benefit ratios when viewing temple gardens or architecture, but it takes considerable financial resources to both construct and maintain the aesthetically pleasing edifices of a temple compound. If a family is affiliated with a temple as a member, they will be obliged to contribute to repair projects, to programs run through the temple, and to support the livelihood of a priest and his family. In exchange, they can count on the priest to provide funerals and periodic memorials for their immediate family members. Even people who are not temple members can contract with a priest to offer prayers at a funeral, sometimes via an online booking agency (see Chapter 5).

But what about Buddhism as a means to transform human consciousness and confront the causes of suffering? Individuals interested in these practices may be wondering how they manifest in Japan’s diverse Buddhist communities. Of Japan’s seven major denominations (Tendai, Shingon, Rinzai Zen, Sōtō Zen, Pure Land, True Pure Land, and Nichiren), only four have methods that could be said to lead to a radical spiritual awakening similar to Shakyamuni Buddha’s enlightenment. The others advance paths to liberation via key scriptures or the writings of their founders, the powers of bodhisattvas and buddhas to intercede in one’s life, and the efficacy of ritual to transform individuals because (it is thought) they cannot do so themselves in these challenging times. By and large, the current emphasis on meditation and enlightenment so prevalent in the West is based largely on a complex array of cultural trends and historical actors, includ-
ing Japanese Buddhist priests and scholars living abroad, who have privileged this aspect of the tradition (see Chapters 2 and 6).³

One Zen priest in his mid-fifties told me confidentially that he cannot point to a single individual within his denomination who exhibits what he considers to be enlightened behavior on a par with earlier precedents. “Even though meditation [zazen] is central to our tradition, it is hardly important in how we run our temples and interact with our members. By and large, they are not interested in this difficult practice, nor do they much care as to whether their priest continues to meditate or has achieved awakening [satori].” This is not to say that temples no longer offer meditation, or that the tradition is moribund within training halls for monks. Nonetheless, despite the considerable historical legacy of these traditions, there has not been a general cultural trend to apply meditation as a form of self-help or therapy similar to what we find in the West.

Chapter 2 details some of the history and prevailing characteristics of Buddhism and its priests in Japan, one of which is the fact that most priests have families and hope to pass along the management of their temple to the head priest’s eldest son. We will also see how a combination of historical forces has led to a legal structure that effectively requires temples to provide some kind of benefit to society while operating like a small business. Comparatively speaking, this is quite different from the way Buddhist temples operate in other Asian nations such as Thailand, China, or Sri Lanka.

In such a situation, a tension emerges between religious ideals and sociocultural realities. Temples have long served a fairly stable community of families and patrons, but what happens when demographic shifts caused by economic and other social factors—some originating outside Japan—subvert these long-standing relationships? What are temples to do if a growing number of people no longer find religion credible, in part because they are now free to determine for themselves just what and how to believe? These questions are quite unlike any faced by Buddhism during its long history in Japan. For those Japanese who could care less if a lack of financial patronage causes a 450-year-old temple to close, it would take nothing short of a miracle to convince them that Buddhism has more to offer than just rituals, funerals, and expensive grave sites.

Buddhist priests from Japan’s seven major denominations are the primary protagonists in this story about the adaptation of religious traditions to dramatic social change. They must not only operate in the same economic milieu as regular citizens (with household, educational, transportation, and health care expenses) but do so in a way that appears to harmonize their roles as religious specialists and savvy administrators of an institution. Every aspect of temple
management—paying for insurance, salaries, taxes (though at a different rate),
genral maintenance, loan repayment, continuing education, and retirement—is
fluenced and shaped by a shifting combination of social, cultural, legal, eco-
nomic, and, yes, even religious forces. Some of these influences have gained new
traction because Japanese society has become inextricably linked to transnational
etworks of commerce, communication, transportation, and finance. A growing
number of priests believe that if Buddhism is to have meaning for people living
in a market-driven, hybrid society—where venerable religious traditions and
cutting-edge innovations interact in often unpredictable ways—its institutions
and religious leaders must explore new and innovative approaches.

OVERVIEWS AND OBSERVATIONS

This book surveys and analyzes some of the strategies, policies, programs, and
even a few performances initiated by progressive priests as ways to reinvigorate
Buddhist traditions and enhance their significance. In general, this research re-
sponds to critical comments made by two leading scholars of Buddhism in Japan.
Robert Sharf noted in 1995 that although nearly half the Japanese population
has some affiliation with Buddhist temples, there has been “a noticeable lack of
ethnographically textured and anthropologically sophisticated studies of the
older Buddhist schools and practices as they survive in the modern period.”
Nearly ten years later not much had changed, leading Helen Hardacre to remark
that “contemporary Japanese Buddhism . . . may be the least-studied aspect of
modern religious life.” She goes on to say that in addition to basic research, new
conceptual paradigms are needed that can facilitate analysis and understanding
of the significance of Japanese Buddhism in contemporary society.

In Chapter 1, I introduce the concept of “experimental Buddhism” as a
theoretical frame for identifying and organizing some of the key features that
distinguish innovation and activism within broadly “Buddhist” and contempo-
rary contexts. The idea that religious practice, belief, and affiliation can be ex-
perimental is not especially original, and yet I have found this perspective useful
when assessing the situation in Japan. Historian Carol Gluck observes that “all
theories have histories hidden inside them,” in part because they are used “to ex-
plain a particular historical development.” This is certainly true for the varying
approaches taken by priests and lay practitioners regarding contemporary Japa-
nese Buddhism. Emphasizing experimentation also holds relevance for how indi-
viduals worldwide think of and affiliate with Buddhist traditions. Moreover,
ideas commonly associated with the term “experimental”—such as its trial-and-
error approach to problem solving or the agency and intentions of the person conducting the experiment—reference patterns of religious practice in local cultures, as well as how individuals, organizations, networked systems, and economies within those cultures respond to, resist, and often rework experimental processes. By surveying some key developments of the late twentieth century, Chapter 1 sets the stage for the appearance of an experimental approach to religious belief and practice. Chapter 2 then traces some of the fascinating religious and social history informing modern Buddhism in Japan before positioning it within contemporary circumstances.

As a term both theoretical and descriptive of behaviors and practices, “experimental Buddhism” is similar to other paired concepts such as “sustainable agriculture,” “social network,” or “modern art.” Each word evokes a normative definition that is then nuanced, juxtaposed, and made interactive with the second term. Experimental Buddhism helps to account for wide-ranging attitudes and activities regarding diverse Buddhist traditions during a time of remarkable shifts in technology, lifestyle, and worldview (to name only three). Among its other features, the concept helps to structure and map the considerable diversity and movement within temple Buddhism. Central to this approach is a sense of pragmatism arising from the agency of individuals. We will encounter many examples of well-intentioned priests from a variety of denominations who assess the conditions of their immediate situation—shaped by a combination of domestic and global influences—and then try something new to advance goals that benefit both their temple and society in meaningful ways. Not all are successful, of course, but through repeated efforts a priest learns important lessons about the interface between plans, participants, actions, and results.

An intriguing aspect of the contemporary scene is the manner in which many priests have, whether consciously or not, adopted a three-part process associated with the scientific method. Once considered heretical by religious authorities in Europe, today there is nothing unique about developing a hypothesis, testing it according to a particular methodology, and then analyzing the results as objectively as possible. In some examples discussed in Chapters 3 to 6, a combination of Buddhist-inspired activism and institutional resources drive innovation as well as shape policies for their social applications. A new type of altar, ritual, memorial, or even temple builds upon established precedents and then, through either a creative repositioning of the familiar or perhaps the introduction of an outside element, something fresh and (possibly) significant results. Social activism can likewise be motivated by traditional Buddhist values of compassion or merit, and then applied to creative initiatives that tackle some of the most
daunting problems facing Japanese society: suicide, domestic violence, social withdrawal syndrome, elder care, and, more recently, the nuclear power industry.

In all the examples presented in this book, the particular type of Buddhism in play is far less important than the methods used by individuals to try and achieve their objectives. Rather than laboring to distinguish the denominations of priests, the concept of experimental Buddhism links many types of innovation and activism. In most cases, priests are not motivated by directives from the headquarters of their denominations or even because they are inspired by core Buddhist teachings. Instead, a personal and often subjective concern, which may also resonate with certain Buddhist values, moves them to action on behalf of some of society’s most vulnerable members. Yet priests like this are an exception to the norm. Readers should keep this point in mind lest they come to regard Japan’s Buddhist priests as saintly figures concerned as much about social welfare as they are about keeping temple finances in the black.

**METHODOLOGIES**

Here there is much to be understood, but none of the participants in the scene can claim to understand it all or even take it all in.

Everyone is a little confused (some more than others, to be sure), and everyone finds some things that seem clear and others that are unintelligible or only partially intelligible.

James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*, 208

As the quotation above (about a copper mining operation in Africa) attests, engaging a complex, interrelated set of issues animated by diverse actors in multiple sites is a daunting, even humbling task. So it seems prudent to identify a few shortcomings at the outset of a lengthy project, especially one as multifaceted as this. Using investigative tools from anthropology, sociology, history, economics, and politics, my goal is to present a credible narrative about the current conditions and shifting significance of Buddhist temples in Japan. I have striven for clarity, accuracy, and reflexive awareness in presenting the material. Trained as a cultural anthropologist when postmodern theory was on the rise, I would be the last person to argue for the “factual” nature of my observations about contemporary Buddhism in Japan. There is simply too much movement and too many variables in play to assert that any portrayal does justice to the complexity of a situation or a person’s motivations. Conclusions made today can quickly become dated or rendered simplistic by better scholarship that benefits from
additional time, greater energy, and sharper intelligence. As noted anthropologist Arjun Appadurai reminds us, “the apparent stabilities that we see are, under close examination, usually our devices for handling objects characterized by motion.”

On the other hand, I have some modest confidence that readers can use the information in this book to map thematic territories that have been little explored until now. There is excellent scholarship on Buddhism past and present, and I am grateful to the authors of those works for orienting me to a different kind of religious culture than I had studied previously. Compared to my earlier books and a documentary film that focused intensely on three specific religious institutions in the world of Shinto (Suwa Shrine, Kamigamo Shrine, and Yasukuni Shrine), the current project may seem untethered to some readers and in need of theoretical grounding in the disciplines of Buddhist studies, anthropology, sociology, history, or religious studies.

While I draw upon these and other academic approaches, maintaining a brand-name loyalty to methods associated with particular disciplines—textual study, ethnography, survey data, historiography, or cross-cultural comparison—does not give the kind of balanced overview of contemporary Buddhism I wanted to provide. Thus, a flexible combination of these approaches was more representative of and useful for explaining the social and cultural realities of Japanese temples. For example, what research tools should be employed (or disregarded) to explain why a Buddhist priest would become politically active in opposing nuclear power when some of his temple members—whose periodic contributions supply his salary—were economically dependent on that same industry? Or how might one assess the motivations of a priest who, facing considerable criticism from his colleagues, opened a storefront temple in the middle of a city’s main shopping district? In each case, written accounts were important and so I used books, Web sites, and articles from scholarly and popular publications that were written by and about Buddhist priests. I also referenced histories related to the development of Buddhism in Japan as well as the unique ways in which priests and laypeople have expressed key themes and concepts. As a cultural anthropologist, I made a sustained effort to interview ordained Buddhist priests on topics central to their understanding and practice of Buddhism, and how these perspectives affected the institutional management and social roles of their temples.

In short, this study assesses the interactivity of individuals and institutions involved in contemporary Japanese temple Buddhism with a historically significant moment of rapid social change. I wanted to discover what strategies, policies, understandings, and actions make possible the continuing adaptation to
and relevance of an ancient and venerable religion in the twenty-first century. To address this topic (and many others), I read from a variety of mostly English and Japanese sources and spoke with priests of all ages, educational backgrounds, and denominational affiliations from temples in rural and urban settings. Ranging from very famous temples with vast resources (such as the World Heritage Site Tōdaiji in Nara, discussed in Chapter 5) to shabby-looking temples in economically depressed neighborhoods, my preference was for average institutions whose primary purpose is to provide Buddhist rituals focusing on the memorialization of ancestors. Since much of my energy was devoted to understanding the motivations and activities of Buddhist priests in this context, their (mostly male) voices are perhaps overrepresented. Their portraits and profiles in the book should not be read as collective or even representative of what constitutes the social role and status of a typical priest. Instead, efforts to incorporate their words and ideas should be considered as a “charitable attempt” to convey the “native point of view” in a way that priests themselves would recognize as honest and accurate, even if they may not agree with what is being said. Categories of “liberal,” “moderate,” or “conservative” apply to religious specialists as well as to politicians.

Indeed, one missing element of this study is opinions from what might be identified for convenience as the “common person.” Readers will on occasion encounter critiques and attitudes originating with average women and men. However, given the itinerant and decentered type of research I was doing (about which more will be said shortly), I was unable to access regularly the voices of housewives, businessmen, farmers, shopkeepers, retirees, young adults, and so on. To do so would have required spending considerably more time in a community, as well as earning the trust of leading figures in temple administration and community affairs.

It was often difficult enough to make contact with a priest to whom I had no personal introduction or connection. In about one-fourth of my interviews, I would target or spot a temple in a neighborhood and ring the doorbell unannounced. It was then a matter of luck, coincidence, and decorum whether my request to speak with the head priest or his representative would be accommodated. I am not a Buddhist and, even if I were, being a “Buddhist” in Japan is always prefaced by the denomination with which one is affiliated. In other words, one belongs to a Tendai or Pure Land or Nichiren tradition before considering broader affiliations with a generic category of “Buddhism.” I am profoundly grateful to those priests who found the time to accommodate a total stranger asking what may have been seen as impertinent questions about the condition of
their temple enterprise and their opinions about contemporary Buddhist institutions. Encounters with priests who, for one reason or another, sent me on my way with an excuse, a reasoned rejection, or a terse rebuff were also educational in both personal and professional ways. What was stimulating and challenging throughout this fieldwork was to try and situate the understanding of a single priest regarding the conditions of his local temple within greater, more encompassing networks and patterns of influence.

When approaching priests at temples in Japan today—or in any country for that matter—answers to predictable questions about denomination, history, core teachings, or clientele reveal very little about what is really going on. What is needed instead is a diagnosis of a temple’s complex and interwoven economic, institutional, administrative, and religious dynamics. These issues immediately propel fieldwork into more diffuse networks that condition “local knowledge” in decisive ways but which are often opaque and hard to access. In Japan, very little information about a local temple is available in published form accessible to a researcher. In most cases, considerable time in residence would be required to gain the trust and confidence of a priest before he would even consider sharing hard data about the financial condition of his temple. And so, when interviewing Buddhist priests, I tried to establish credibility by asking first about the one thing that matters most: the temple’s client base. How many households are temple members in good standing, and how stable is this number? If membership is in a slow decline and this creates a shortfall of revenue, does the priest work outside the temple to make ends meet? Where and how could new members be located?

Next, I asked about challenges in preserving the temple buildings and precincts. Due to the high cost of repair and construction, these issues are frequent concerns for many priests, especially in areas where earthquake damage remains an issue (central Japan in 1995, northeastern Japan in 2011). What parts of the main or outlying buildings are in need of restoration, and how will the needed funds be raised? Are there plans to sponsor events or performances that might help with fund-raising as well as appeal to people and get them interested in Buddhism? The final question in this thread, “Does the denomination’s headquarters help with repairs?” often served as a segue into learning more about the temple’s relationship with and obligations to central authority.

Inquiries about a priest’s individual goals were also likely to draw out issues that mattered personally and professionally. How does he (or she) spend free time? What organizations and agendas does the priest support by attending meetings and making contributions? And finally, which of Japan’s social problems does
the priest find compelling enough to call for some kind of action on behalf of himself and the temple? Are there any Buddhist values the priest finds relevant in addressing these issues?

Responses to these questions served as a barometer for the changing conditions of a temple in contemporary Japan. Replies pointed out long-range tendencies, the highs and lows of temple affairs and administration, and whether a “storm” was approaching that could put the temple at risk. The range of answers helped clarify what type of pressures the temple must respond to—financial, interpersonal, ideological, or perhaps even spiritual and religious—and whether the situation would result in short-term alterations or augmentations to the stability of the institution.12

The solitary voices of individuals who contributed to this project are amplified by the writing process. We know that however convincing ethnographic description may appear to the reader, its effectiveness in providing a window to another culture contains a series of interwoven dependencies: a particular research design, how one individual translates and interprets the material, a set of analytical frameworks, and a specific style of writing.13 A researcher accepts from the beginning of a project that her observations and arguments will remain partial because they can never be comprehensive of the reality under study. Individual understandings and dispositions (for both informants and authors) are important of course, and so we must alternate between magnifying glasses and telescopes when studying society and culture.

The research for this book emphasizes ethnographic fieldwork—a kind of empirical, firsthand, and close encounter with informants and situations—but extends well beyond the individual to reference broader issues that provide an integration of perspectives. I do not advocate nor presume that I have “a superior vantage point from which to understand the challenges faced by those under study.”14 As the quotation above notes so poignantly, both the researcher and the people she studies have a multiplicity of views about any given topic; no single individual is capable of comprehending the full range of complexities involved.

Thirty years ago a research design would have been considered flawed if it proposed that, abilities aside, a single ethnographer had the responsibility to chart issues and themes that are simultaneously local and also arrayed in extended networks. Today, however, research into almost any topic has little choice but to seek information that is local—gathered through firsthand fieldwork and archival materials—as well as decentered and multiplied among a number of sites. This approach is particularly appropriate for the study of religion, since the
ways in which its ideas, practices, and practitioners travel has always given it a translocal and, in the case of Buddhism particularly, a global quality.  

In a multisite study, arriving at a detailed ethnographic understanding of each temple is not practical in part because of the time and resources required but also because research objectives extend beyond a single site. Perhaps more important is that a multisite study focuses on problems and issues that forge connections between central themes. Information from one location contributes to additional examples gathered elsewhere, all in service of (and often subverting) one’s research hypothesis. For instance, parishioners of a temple in central Kobe may feel that the aging priest is out of touch with their spiritual concerns and financial struggles, and offers little in the way of guidance or emotional support, so why should they remain affiliated with and pay membership fees to this priest and his temple? A single case like this, repeated around the country in endless variations, is complex and contentious but also representative of larger trends affecting all Buddhist denominations. Moving among a range of temples provided opportunities for comparison and contrast in how a number of actors addressed issues and problems that surface in many of this book’s discussions. Shifting populations, elderly or indifferent priests, reliance on rituals, greater secularization, the privatization of religious practice—as well as some creative approaches to dealing with these challenges—are all common themes faced by temple priests throughout Japan.

To summarize, the multisite study coheres primarily through linkages among a set of shared topics rather than face-to-face relationships and encounters. Individuals certainly represent particular and often discrete local cultures, but they are also, as noted anthropologist George Marcus puts it, “nodes in distributed knowledge systems.” The multisite study helps to bring about cumulative understandings derived through a range of “knowledge systems.” Cristina Rocha’s ethnography of Zen in Brazil employed a multisite ethnography that focused as much on “cosmopolitan and hybrid experiences” as it did on those that were “rooted and native.” This juxtaposition calls attention to an interactive balance between local, regional, and global perspectives. It also reminds us how an inadequate conception of the field of research can obscure the way global flows acquire local forms. Moving between multiple sites, assessing the perspectives of informants, referencing historical and contemporary trends, and remaining alert to movement on the radar of evolving Buddhist practice can credibly evoke a particular historical moment in Japanese religious history as well as the attempt of a single researcher to give it life.
A PICTURE-PERFECT PROBLEM

One short story will conclude these preliminary remarks and launch the first chapter. In a temple on Noto peninsula, located on Japan’s north-central coast, I was fortunate to find a head priest and his next-in-line successor/son at home on a hot, early summer afternoon and available for an interview. After explaining my project and research affiliations, and asking his permission to use the information in this book, our conversation turned to the circumstances of the temple. I had noticed that the grounds were well maintained, the temple structures in good repair, and that the family’s living quarters adjacent to the main sanctuary were fairly spacious and comfortable compared to the cramped conditions of other dwellings in the neighborhood. When informed that the temple’s members represented some 400 households—about 30 percent above what is considered average by many priests—it appeared to me an ideal situation for the priest and his family.

Nonetheless, there were worries about the future. The head priest, a man in his mid-sixties, said he expects a declining temple membership as people pass away or continue to leave the community for economic opportunities in urban areas. His son noted that young people his age (late twenties) are considered “losers” if they don’t try at least once to make it in the city. The head priest was also concerned about existing relationships with some families that had been members since the temple’s founding in the mid-1600s. “I can’t explain it well, and I certainly don’t understand why, but these relationships have become thin [usui]. It seems as if they could end at any time, and that makes me nervous. I don’t want to do anything that might offend someone and thus cause them to leave the temple.” Were a primary household to withdraw or end their membership, and especially if they were to move the family grave, the damage to temple finances and public relations would be significant.

From the outside, this splendid temple is suitable for the front of a postcard depicting a traditional and ongoing Buddhist presence in Japanese society. Behind these appearances, however, are fissures and uncertainties that have destabilized not only the confidence of its priest but the future viability of the entire temple enterprise. Instead of thinking about the influence of Buddhism on contemporary society, we will be looking at how society is shaping not only the activities of priests and temples but also the future prospects for this religious tradition to continue in Japan. It is to these concerns that the discussion now turns.