

Journal of Buddhist Ethics
ISSN 1076-9005
<http://www.buddhistethics.org/>
Volume 18, 2011

*Buddhist Monasticism in East Asia:
Places of Practice*

Reviewed by Pei-Yin Lin

School of Oriental and African Studies
bibo825@gmail.com

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to:
editor@buddhistethics.org

A Review of *Buddhist Monasticism in East Asia: Places of Practice*

Pei-Yin Lin¹

Buddhist Monasticism in East Asia: Places of Practice. Edited by James A. Benn, Lori Meeks, and James Robson. New York: Routledge, 2010, 248 pages, ISBN: 9780415489775 (hardcover), US \$135.00

This book is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of studies focusing on Buddhist practice. It offers a timely description of the manifold contributions made by the Buddhist monastery as an institution in medieval China and Japan, and benefits its readers by helping them to understand the nature and function of such monasteries. As the importance of monasticism in East Asian Buddhism has long been recognised, the continuing paucity of modern scholarship in this field is somewhat remarkable. An earlier attempt to rectify this situation is found in the handsomely produced book edited by William Bodiford, *Going Forth: Visions of the Buddhist Vinaya* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), which attempts to call our attention to the significance of Buddhist monastic codes in premodern China and Japan. Both books focus on the evolution of monasticism; emphasis on change and continuity of that Buddhist institution across different cultures has made the topics covered in these books more complex and rich in their contents. As a result, both stand as prime models of the history of Buddhist monasticism.

¹ School of Oriental and African Studies. Email: bibo825@gmail.com

Granted the diversity of cultural backgrounds of Buddhist monasticism, this new book does not overreach itself by aiming to provide a comprehensive survey of monasticism, but wisely retains its focus on a few aspects of monasticism in China and Japan. The divisions are well structured: three chapters on China, three on Japan and one from a cross-cultural perspective. Each of the seven chapters covers one important aspect of monasticism. These are space, image, poem, lifeways, history, doctrine and practice, respectively. In dealing with these topics, this book touches upon the genres of geography, literature, *vinaya*, art, ritual and perceptions of Buddhism.

James Robson's introductory chapter, "Neither Too Far, Nor Too Near," reflects on the intriguing secular-sacred relationship within the monasteries and begins by questioning the term "monastery" in the Buddhist context. Although it seems that we all have a general understanding of monasticism, this topic has rarely entered scholarly studies in such a pellucid way. Beginning from the fifth century CE, as the number of lay Buddhists increased, the self-definition of Buddhist monks required theorization in order to establish a hierarchy in the relationship of the secular and the sacred. Part of this involved deciding if monks were intrinsically superior to lay Buddhists. As Robson puts it, "Monasticism is perceived to be such a central part of Buddhist self-definition that one of the final signs of the disappearance of the dharma is when monastic robes turn white — the color of lay robes.... A Chan/Zen practitioner might, for example, ask: If a person already possesses inherent Buddha nature, what need is there to become a monk and pursue a path of spiritual cultivation within a monastery?" (2) At the same time, the image of separation from society might lead to a misunderstanding of the actual monastic settings, which in reality were to be "neither too far, nor too near to urban settlements — neither entirely separated off from the world, nor entirely within the world" (3).

The purpose of Buddhist ordination is the pursuit of enlightenment and the transcendence of the everyday world through monasticism. To modern scholars, the tension inherent in choosing between a focus on the social realities of the monastery and its soteriological function has become increasingly apparent. It also seems quite difficult for modern scholars to weave together doctrine and practice in a balanced way. In this regard, Koichi Shinohara's chapter can be regarded as a model example for studying both of these aspects of Buddhism thoroughly. His "Taking a Meal at a Lay Supporter's Residence: The Evolution of the Practice in Chinese *Vinaya* Commentaries" provides a thorough case study of monks' responsibilities when receiving meals from the laity. Beginning from an analysis of two stories from the *āgamas* in Chinese translation and their commentaries by Daoxuan (596–667) and Daoshi (596?–683), the Buddhist ceremony of inviting monks for a meal at a lay supporter's residence is discussed within the context of the genre of miracle tale collections. Merit making is the central concern of this ceremony, and in these rituals the exchange relationship — merit making and the reception of a blessing — connects the lay community and the monks. This excellent study enhances our understanding of the interlocking economic concerns that prevented the monasteries from becoming entirely detached from society.

James Robson's chapter, "Monastic Spaces and Sacred Traces: Facets of Chinese Buddhist Monastic Codes," examines the variety of monastic institutions that existed in China, ranging from the state monasteries (*guanli si*), to private monasteries and small local institutions. This survey enables Robson to reconsider the diversity of institutions collected under the catchall term "monastery" that is used in studies of Chinese Buddhism. Instead of the role of monks in the histories, it focuses on the characteristics and representations of Chinese monasteries to answer the question, "what made the space sacred?" The case study that Robson offers of the Nanyue Temple in China sheds light

on the ways that the concept of sacredness became linked with Buddhist monasteries. In this case the symbolic meaning of people and place in sacred geography went through a process of change and restoration. As it turns out, by the late Tang Dynasty, there had developed a complex cosmic/body symbolism of the monastery, in which Buddhist consciousness meets with geography.

In “Pictorial Program in the Making of Monastic Space: From Jing’aisi of Luoyang to Cave 217 at Dunhuang,” Eugene Wang poses the following question: If most monasteries in China were adapted from aristocratic mansions, “what was it that made the Buddha hall a distinctively symbolic space?” (54). In a commentary on the Buddha hall at the Jing’ai Monastery written by the architectural connoisseur Zhang Yanyuan (ca. 815–?), it appears that Empress Wu identified herself with the Maitreya statues present there and for this reason generously patronized that particular monastery. To our surprise, a comparison with the wall paintings in Cave 217 at Dunhuang shows that Zhang Yanyuan was mistaken, while it also reveals the religious agendas as well as overtones of tensions and emotional detachment of the patrons. The tableaux from this cave portray a number of different Buddhist concepts including the wheel-turning king of the Lotus blossom, filial piety, visualization of the Pure Land, and the posthumous well being of the dead. Wang sees the functions of these paintings as negotiations between the short-term political climate and the long-term soteriological needs of the community. As a whole, this study is instructive in guiding us through the complicated role of political agendas in the execution of religious paintings.

In “The Monastery Cat in Cross-cultural Perspective: Cat Poems of the Zen Masters,” T. H. Barrett traces the symbolic meaning of cats in Buddhism using a wide range of sources, from Buddhist poetry to folklore collected by Minakata Kumagusu (1867–1941). As described in a sixth century non-Buddhist dictionary and then in eighth century Budd-

hist poetry, the image of cats, probably introduced from India, went through a process of legitimation in Buddhist perceptions up to the time when it appears in the alarming story about Chan master Nanquan Puyuan (748–835) killing a cat. Assuming that a cat poem in the poetic corpus of Hanshan must have legitimated further writing about cats, Barrett doubts that Japanese Zen masters, while continuing to write cat poems, had ever met any real cats, even though some cats might have been brought to Japan by Chinese masters. This leads to the convincing observation that trivial descriptions of monastic life are not necessarily a literal record of monastic life, but were written within a self-conscious literary tradition (114). As this case demonstrates, because the symbolic meaning of cats within the Buddhist monastic community was continuously shifting, the vibrant imagination of Buddhist monks serves as evidence of their perception of monastic life on a cross-cultural scale.

William Bodiford's chapter, "The Monastic Institution in Medieval Japan: The Insider's View," is an attempt to break through the conceptual frameworks which most scholars continue to use that ignore insiders' reports from within Japanese monasteries. These first-hand reports are invaluable because they provide a glimpse into what the Japanese religious landscape looked like in the past, and into the normative discourses that determined mainstream monastic practice at that time. In this chapter, Bodiford studies five Japanese authors as representative insiders: Minamoto Tamenori (d. 1011), Eisai (1141–1215), Ichien (1226–1312), Kōshū (1276–1350) and Kokan Shiren (1278–1346). Detailed appendices containing information on the rituals, biographies, temples and histories associated with these five authors are to be found at the end of this chapter, which constitutes a handy tool for students and scholars of this field. Although the perspectives of these authors are limited by their biases and sectarian prejudices, their writings are still useful in depicting a monastic life that medieval Buddhists themselves would recognize. Bodiford demonstrates that it is incumbent on all scho-

lars and students to be familiar with this type of writing in order to understand medieval monasteries.

In “Vows for the Masses: Eison and the Popular Expansion of Precept-conferral Ceremonies in Premodern Japan,” Lori Meeks stresses the ideological tools used to create close ties between monastic and court elites. During the period under discussion the accumulation of merit embodied in the precept conferral ceremony for laity and monks drew enormous attention from Japanese Buddhists. Monks’ ordination became a rather fashionable element of laity-sponsored precept ceremonies among the aristocracy, and that ordination was so loosely defined that one did not necessarily need to enter the monastery after undergoing it. In the case of Eison’s (1201–1290) precept-conferral ceremonies, Meeks shows us how the very notion of “official ordination” became incorporated into interpretations of worldly benefits and merit transference. This is a case of the Buddhist perception of “leaving home” (*shukke*) shifting to fit the social and political circumstances of Japanese Buddhism.

In Paul Groner’s “Kōen and the ‘Consecrated Ordination’ Within Japanese Tendai,” he uses a case study of Master Kōen (1263–1317) to explore the ways in which original enlightenment (*hongaku*) ideas were transferred to a ritual context. The case of the Kurodani lineage’s “consecrated ordination” shows that categories of distinction and identity are effectively carried out through rituals grounded in the interpretation of Buddhist doctrines such as original enlightenment. Departing from mainstream Tendai’s abstract interpretation of the precepts and running counter to the increasing laxity in adherence to the precepts present in medieval Japan, the Kurodani lineage continued to stress the importance of adhering to the precepts. Argument over adherence to monastic discipline indicates the struggles in administrating the monastic order in a wider social context. Kōen’s writings can be seen as an attempt to reform

Tendai monasticism through new ritual calendars and doctrinal explanations. A marginal figure like Kōen, Groner argues, can provide us with a more nuanced view of medieval Tendai, one that incorporates both doctrinal interpretation and ritual context.

This book offers a wealth of new research and careful considerations presented by leading scholars in the field. Especially noteworthy about this volume are the editors' efforts at ensuring clarity and imposing stylistic uniformity. On the whole, the individual essays uphold solid academic standards and shed light on significant aspects of East Asian Buddhism. The main themes that run through much of the book are how Buddhists in East Asia tried to adapt the concepts of monastic space, monastic life, and monastic discipline to their particular cultural contexts. Not only will this book serve as a valuable resource for scholars and students, it will hopefully encourage further investigations into places of religious practice across cultures.