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Experimental Buddhism: Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan

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Experimental Buddhism: Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan. By John K. Nelson. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013, 292 pages, ISBN: 9780824838980 (paperback), \$32.00.

In Japan, Buddhism is popularly perceived as an outdated tradition fixated on mortuary rites. This poor image, together with the post-war success of new religious movements, has resulted in contemporary Japanese Buddhism being a much-understudied field. In recent years, however, we have witnessed a shift in Buddhist Studies' traditional inclination toward textual studies, as more scholars have turned their attention to studying traditional Japanese Buddhism as a living religion (Covell, Borup, Rowe). John Nelson's study, reviewed here, is another important contribution to our understanding of the complex interactions between Buddhist tradition and contemporary Japanese society. Based on a great variety of sources, such as personal interviews, websites, news reports, and commercials, this study presents a rich and fascinating description of contemporary Japanese Buddhism.

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The strength of Nelson's publication lies in the depth of his descriptions, as well as in what he refers to as a "flexible combination" of different methodologies (xix). At the same time, the ethnography is presented in an easily comprehensible language, and in an appealing journalistic style that gives the reader a feeling of being where the action is. Nelson follows several other scholars in the study of contemporary religion who emphasize lived religion, which is religion as experienced, conceptualized, and even invented by the individual (McGuire). Accordingly, the book emphasizes the role played by individuals, rather than that of institutions, in constructing contemporary Buddhist reality in Japan. As its subtitle suggests, *Experimental Buddhism* focuses on innovative attempts by members of the Buddhist clergy to revitalize their tradition, thereby making it relevant and influential in contemporary Japanese society.

Chapter one opens with a story of a 400-year-old Pure Land temple located in the heart of Kyoto. The temple's alleged deliberate burning, and the attempts to reconstruct it, highlights various tensions that exist between long-established Buddhist institutes and rapid social, cultural, and economic changes. Nelson's basic thesis, presented in this chapter, is that the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are characterized by unique historical and social circumstances that differ dramatically from anything Buddhism has ever encountered (10). These include rapid social changes brought about by external forces, shifting religious beliefs, and new configurations of the self. Nelson especially emphasizes globalization and personal choice as unique features in what he defines as the "late modern era" (27).

Against the above backdrop, Nelson presents a gloomy picture of Buddhist institutions that largely fail to adjust themselves to the great economical, political, and conceptual challenges posed by late modernity. More specifically, he believes that Buddhism's future development lies in the hands of individual priests who are willing to risk experimenting with their traditional roles. Their "experimental Buddhism" is pre-

sented as a pattern of thought and action that can be characterized by five major features: (1) global position; (2) individualism; (3) great creativity; (4) everyday life as the source of the Buddhist values; and (5) reciprocity with society (23). As can be seen, Nelson regards experimental Buddhism as both a theoretical framework to examine recent developments in Japanese Buddhism, as well as a recommended course of action for Buddhists to follow.

Chapter two provides a general background on contemporary Japanese Buddhism. The first section is perhaps one of the best, and it is definitely one of the shortest summaries of the history of Buddhism in Japan. Students and readers who are new to this field will find this section most helpful. Next, the book discusses Buddhism's confrontation with modernity during the Meiji period (1868-1912). Last, this chapter surveys the situation and conditions of contemporary Buddhism, including a brief summary of the main Buddhist sects, as well as the major issues facing Buddhist priests, most notably of these being the question of Funerary Buddhism (*sōshiki Bukkyō*). Nelson concludes by identifying four major problems that Japanese Buddhism should urgently address: (1) improving public relations; (2) attracting the masses; (3) connecting with the cultural heritage; and (4) benefiting society (67-69).

Chapters three to five constitute the bulk of the study. Chapter three discusses socially engaged Buddhism, or Buddhist-inspired social activism. After a rather long, and in my opinion unnecessary, overview of the history of Buddhist social welfare, Nelson examines the concept of socially engaged Buddhism from a global perspective. He also examines the activities of several Buddhist NGOs and NPOs in and outside Japan. Next, he presents four cases of Buddhist temples belonging to different denominations that are actively involved in social projects. One intriguing example discussed here is the suicide prevention program operated by Buddhist priests nationwide. The rest of the chapter discusses Buddhist disaster relief and antinuclear activities that occurred after the 2011 Eastern Japan earthquake and the Fukushima nuclear disaster. One

of Nelson's important observations here is the role the disaster played in catalyzing Buddhist activism in contemporary Japan.

Chapter four presents several case studies of Buddhist priests, who, through their initiative and innovation, transformed their temples into sites of nontraditional activity—places of healing, education, and even fun. For example, Rev. Akita of the Pure Land School offers various kinds of mental and physical therapies in his Osaka temple. Everyone's Temple (*Minna no otera*), established by Rev. Hashimoto in the middle of a shopping arcade in downtown Nara, provides easy access to Buddhist practices, such as sūtra copying and meditation. Especially interesting are several bars operated by Buddhist priests, which give their clients opportunities for informal interactions with Buddhist teaching (138). Nelson concludes the chapter with the prediction that the first two decades of the twenty-first century will be a turning point for Japanese temple Buddhism. He believes that the progressive approach discussed in this chapter is vital for the survival of Buddhism in Japan.

Chapter five explores more examples of innovative forms of Buddhist practice in Japan. Nelson demonstrates how economical and technological developments are utilized to form new models of religious practice. One place where this study excels lies precisely in its treatment of such economic and technological factors. Nelson presents the latest developments in mortuary services, from Internet societies to the Aeon funeral chain stores and pet memorial rituals. Especially intriguing here is Nelson's analysis of the reconceptualization and reconfiguration of the meaning of the home altar (*butsudan*). Finally, Nelson turns the readers' attention to the use of Buddhist temples for public events such as concerts and fashion shows, and their use as cafés and public spaces, all of which are meant to generate revenue and attract new believers.

Chapter six, entitled "The Future of Buddhism in Japan," provides an in-depth description of two more case studies of priests who experimented with Buddhist teaching. One such case is that of Rev. Miura Akari, a True Pure Land School priest, who uses music and singing as

part of her Buddhist instruction. The second example is that of Rev. Kawakami Takafumi, a Rinzai priest who reoriented his temple's teaching around meditation sessions. What is interesting about these two examples is that both priests re-conceptualize traditional practices, such as meditation and music, in an innovative, experimental manner, which differs considerably from the traditional model. Nelson summarizes this chapter by stressing the importance of using an experimental approach for the future of Japanese Buddhism, especially in light of what he sees to be religious decline.

I would like to comment on three points in this study that I find problematic or in need of further clarification. First, I was not entirely convinced of the utility of the theoretical model suggested by Nelson, and I feel that the concept of experimental Buddhism needs additional support. Although Nelson's emphasis on the role of the individual in religious change, and of personal choice as a religious force are important, I do not think he demonstrated the uniqueness of the late modern era. In other words, I was not convinced that the adaptations and innovations in contemporary Buddhism he describes are *essentially* different from those of other periods in Japanese history. Why contemporary Japanese Buddhism should be regarded as more experimental than, for example, Kamakura Buddhism is an intriguing question. Having said that, Nelson's attempt to develop a new theoretical framework is in itself commendable and is rather exceptional in the field of Japanese religion; hopefully it will encourage other scholars to follow in his path.

The second point concerns Nelson's methodology. His study relies on a great variety of examples to provide as broad a picture of Japanese Buddhism as possible. However, the work's strongest point is also a weakness. Nelson's descriptions often feel partial, especially in the sense that they generally present only one perspective—usually that of a Buddhist priest (if one excludes the case of Mrs. Satō, discussed in chapter five). The major problem here is that without the perspective of other adherents, it is difficult to construct a complete picture of the interac-

tion between Buddhism and society. Considering the great emphasis that Nelson puts on the economic market as a driving force in the development of Japanese Buddhism, one would expect that he would have analyzed both the marketer as well as the client. Therefore, I feel it would have been better if Nelson would have examined fewer cases, and had instead provided a more in-depth analysis of each.

Finally, I found Nelson's personal agenda, and especially the way he integrates it into his study, somewhat problematic. Like many Japanese scholars, such as, for example, Ueda Noriyuki (2004), Shimazono Susumu (2013), and others, Nelson has a strong personal agenda concerning the state of Japanese Buddhism and especially toward the path it should follow.² Indeed, one often finds in the book a dismissive rhetoric toward Buddhism. To give but one example:

Buddhist temples and the priests that administer them in Japan are likewise being rocked by forces of which they have varying degree of understanding and even less control. And yet, when looking at the actions of a majority of priest and leaders of their denominations over thirty years, it is hard to feel sorry for them. It is as if they have been at a fine banquet with an exclusive guest list (themselves), one made possible entirely by donations from common people. (9)

Naturally, no study is entirely objective and all scholars are entitled to their own personal views; however, I think it is not the place of a Buddhist studies scholar to recommend, judge, or predict the future. Not only is one's ability to predict rather limited (as Nelson himself admits, 215) but also such statements blur the boundaries between research and agenda. Indeed, while reading the book one often gets the feeling that Nelson accepts anti-Buddhist rhetoric at its face value.

² A similar criticism was raised by Fumihiko Sueki (2006, 82) and Mark Rowe (2007, 455).

However, the above comments do not diminish the author's worthy efforts to shed light on contemporary Japanese Buddhism. The work's unique framework provides us with a fruitful perspective for studying Buddhism in contemporary society. Moreover, Nelson's vivid description, the variety of case studies from different Buddhist sects, and not of less importance, from different geographical areas, makes this work an illuminating and stimulating monograph for scholars, of any level, who are interested in contemporary Buddhism or Japanese religion.

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