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*Lay Zen in Contemporary Japan:
Tradition, Interpretation, and Invention*

Reviewed by Yingjie Chen

Bangor University
ync24cbf@bangor.ac.uk

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A Review of *Lay Zen in Contemporary Japan: Tradition, Interpretation, and Invention*

Yingjie Chen¹

Lay Zen in Contemporary Japan: Tradition, Interpretation, and Invention. By Erez Joskovich. Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2025, 202 Pages, ISBN 978-1-032-49795-2 (paperback), £34.39; ISBN 978-1-032-49792-1 (hardback).

The development of Zen Buddhism in modern Japan reveals a form of spiritual practice that departs from the traditional monastic order and gradually emerges and expands in the form of lay Zen. In *Lay Zen in Contemporary Japan*, Erez Joskovich focuses on a number of representative lay Zen groups, such as Ryōmō-kai and Seiza-kai, and examines in-depth the organizational structures, ideologies, and ritual practices they embody as a contemporary living religion.

By using a variety of methodologies, including philological analysis of Buddhist classics, close reading of historical documents, and ethnographic fieldwork, Joskovich's book analyzes how lay practitioners have reconstructed religious authority and adapted Zen teachings to better suit contemporary social and individual needs. Based on three years of fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and archival research, this book provides a comprehensive picture of diverse meditation practices and explores their

¹ Bangor University. Email: ync24cbf@bangor.ac.uk.

practical functions and cultural significance in contemporary society. Breaking away from the traditional dichotomous framework between orthodox Buddhism and new religions, this study emphasizes the dynamic relationship between tradition and interpretation and their evolutionary processes. Overall, the accessible language and in-depth analysis reveal the important role of folk Zen groups in promoting the modernization of Zen Buddhism.

Chapter one sets the stage by tracing key historical and ideological factors in the status of lay people in Buddhist history. The primary objective of this chapter is to provide the reader with the historical background required to examine the ingenuity of the lay Zen movement in modern Japan. The chapter introduces some of the primary narratives that formed the core of lay Zen ideology in the contemporary period while at the same time providing a critical cultural and historical examination of lay people's status within the Buddhist tradition.

Among other things, Joskovich argues that the terms “Enlightened Householder” or “Lay Bodhisattva” refer not to a historical reality but operate as rhetorical devices in monastic discourse. In addition, he argues that the majority of lay people in Japanese history did not practice Zen meditation techniques. Instead, the few who practiced Zen meditation were mainly patrons of Buddhist institutions, often from the samurai class, who enjoyed monastic training. It is important to note that these patrons, while supporting the operation of the monasteries and participating in some of the religious rituals, were not the same as strict practitioners of Zen meditation. This is because most of the warlords were more interested in consolidating their political rights than in the spiritual dimension of the practice (Benesch 4).

Finally, in the second part of his discussion of the challenges of Zen, Joskovich cites a large number of cases of Zen masters such as Dao Xin, Pang Yun, and Huineng to demonstrate that, although lay practitioners played important roles in Zen history, the tradition ultimately remained a monastic institution in terms of authority and lineage. However,

there is a temporal error in the reference to Pang Yun, who did not become well known in China during the Yuan dynasty, but traveled for many years and became famous during the Tang dynasty (Ferguson 96), a period of more than 300 years between the two dynasties.

Chapter two examines the historical and social changes in Japan at the end of the nineteenth century and the impact of these changes on the development of lay Zen as a distinctive trend in Buddhist practice. Based on the history of the Ningen Zen association with the Sanbōkyōdan and the Shakamuni-kai, Joskovich identifies at least two distinguishing features of modern lay Zen practice. Sanbōkyōdan and the Shakamuni-kai, founded respectively by Yasutani Hakuun and Osaka Kōryū, originated from different traditions of monastic reform but both promoted lay practice and, through the extensive efforts of their disciples, contributed to the popularization of Zen in contemporary Japan, reflecting the gradual appropriation of teaching authority by lay practitioners. First, Ningen Zen is a movement limited to the urban upper-middle class. Second, this distinctive practice trend stems from its monastic origins and asserts the possession of autonomous authority. Thus, Joskovich argues that while the ability of lay people to receive monastic training is not new, their assertion of independent jurisdiction over Zen teachings is essentially a modern development.

Chapter three examines the organizational structure of Ningen Zen, which attempts to strike a balance between innovative organization and traditional authority. Important topics such as legal status, identity attribution, hierarchical structures, and economics are covered to gain insight into the institutional framework of the various sects of lay Zen and situate them in the context of contemporary Japanese Buddhism. This chapter highlights the double paradox that exists in Ningen Zen, which, on the one hand, claims to open the door to all seekers who aspire to practice Zen and which aims to modernize the structure of Zen by adopting a new institutional framework, while, on the other hand, favors a strict hierarchy. The explanation given by Joskovich for this is that the two should

not be seen as contradictory objects but should be understood as two parts of the same modern worldview.

Chapter four explores the main components of modern lay Zen ideology. Concepts such as reform, secularization, and cultural identity have shaped the internal and external presentation of Ningen Zen. For example, Joskovich mentions that the adaptation of Buddhist teachings by lay Zen is deeply rooted in the modern Buddhist discourse that developed in Japan in the second half of the twentieth century. However, aspects such as practical benefits and characterization can be traced back to the much earlier history of Zen. As an illustration, since the beginning of the 20th century, various thinkers have suggested that sitting in Zen can harmonize the mind and body and prevent and cure various diseases.

In addition to delving into the official ideology of the tradition, this chapter also provides ethnographic accounts, such as Joskovich's thoughts on meditation with Kasuya Yosuke and his discussion of sitting meditation with a Zen practitioner named Yumiko Matsuhisa at Takuboku dōjō. These ethnographic accounts supplement his theoretical work by shedding light on the thoughts and beliefs of individual members. Together, these accounts demonstrate the diversity of ideas about Zen practice and emphasize that the reinterpretation of the Zen tradition is an ongoing process that reflects the changes and challenges brought about by contemporary society.

Chapter five describes the various activities in Ningen Zen's dōjō, providing a thick description of rituals such as zazen, sermons, meals, etc. It becomes clear that the dōjō is designed carefully to offer a monastic experience tailored to laypeople's needs, abilities, and beliefs. In addition to this, Joskovich elaborates on ritual activities that are vital to maintaining institutional order and self-regulation. In terms of food, for example, the head cook (tenzo) is responsible for the preparation and serving of food during meditation, and this position is considered to embody similar desirable qualities of moderation, ingenuity, generosity, and mindfulness

amid everyday life. Practitioners were called upon to obey these elders and to seek their help and guidance.

In addition, this chapter focuses on the differences between lay Zen and its monastic counterpart and suggests that laicization of practice displays a tension between a deep commitment to tradition and the need to adapt it for contemporary times. Rituals embody values, hierarchy, and ideology, an integral part of any institution, whether religious or not. Significantly, this chapter also integrates aspects discussed in Chapters three and four to provide a comprehensive picture of the Zen experience. For example, the early development of lay Zen, mentioned in Chapter three, is closely related to some of these moral action movements, while Chapter five adds that a utilitarian rather than idealistic ethic also characterizes lay Zen's thought.

Chapter six provides a summary of the major findings of this study, highlighting the dynamic interplay between tradition and adaptation, continuity and change. Firstly, Joskovich discusses the similarities and differences between lay Zen and Japan's new religious movements, revealing its position between traditional Buddhism and modern innovation, and pointing out that neither Buddhism nor new religions can fully explain contemporary Japanese religious phenomena. He believes that lay Zen challenges the academic world's practice of strictly distinguishing between Buddhism and new religions, and that an analytical framework that reflects both locality and universality is needed to understand modern Japanese Buddhism.

Secondly, he notes modern lifestyles such as Zen temples maintaining their websites and Zen monks often carrying cell phones but does not mention the connection between these examples and tradition. Moreover, the chapter emphasizes the usefulness of lay Zen for re-evaluating longstanding categories commonly used in the study of Japanese religion, particularly in the context of new religious movements. Lastly, it addresses the challenges Ningen Zen may encounter in maintaining its relevance in modern Japanese society. For example, it describes its uncertain

future in the context of the Covid pandemic where the recruitment of lay Zen has increased in 2018, but it remains to be determined whether these efforts will be successful. Some members, especially among the organization veterans, reject the attempt to popularize the practice, especially at the expense of passing practitioners through the kōan quickly and the discipline loosening in the dōjō. Alternatively, they hold that only long, intensive training can ensure that capable people advance along the path. At the same time, Joskovich makes clear that Ningen Zen members highly value their tradition, and it seems unlikely they will let it disappear.

Overall, *Lay Zen in Contemporary Japan* delves into the evolution of lay Zen as a distinct spiritual practice, separate from the standard religious practice of lay parishioners and monastic training. It aims to provide a new perspective on the vital role of lay Zen associations in the modernization of Zen and to demonstrate how ordinary people have adapted religious teachings to meet their requirements and keep up with the changing times. This study investigates Ningen Zen as a case study to examine the emergence of lay Zen as a style of religious practice, specifically, how the organization and its individuals have appropriated religious authority from the established Buddhist sects during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and shaped Zen according to their needs and zeitgeist. Moreover, this study employs a theoretical structure transcending the simplistic classification of religions as longstanding or emerging entities. However, instead of discussing to what extent lay Zen is an innovation, the book emphasizes the idea of continuity or, more precisely, the perception of continuity which stands at the heart of every tradition. *Lay Zen in Contemporary Japan* is therefore of high reference and inspirational value for scholars and students in the fields of religious studies, Buddhist studies, and Japanese social and cultural studies.

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