

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics>

Volume 22, 2015

*The Princess Nun: Bunchi, Buddhist Reform, and Gender
in Early Edo Japan*

Reviewed by Febe D. Pamonag

Western Illinois University

F-Pamonag@wiu.edu

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:
cozort@dickinson.edu

A Review of *The Princess Nun:
Bunchi, Buddhist Reform, and Gender
in Early Edo Japan*

Febe D. Pamonag¹

The Princess Nun: Bunchi, Buddhist Reform, and Gender in Early Edo Japan. By Gina Cogan. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014, xvi+309 pages, ISBN 978-0674491977 (hardback), \$49.95.

Gina Cogan's study of the life and ascetic practice of Bunchi (1619-1697), the eldest daughter of Emperor Go-Mizunoo and founder of Enshōji, a Rinzai Zen convent that she established at Shūgakuin in Kyoto in 1642, provides valuable insight into religious reform in early modern Japan. Drawing mainly on Bunchi's autobiography written in 1868, "Chronicle of Universal Gate Mountain," as well as the monk Chimyō Jōin's biographical account of Bunchi's life, Cogan examines Bunchi's life and ascetic practice through the lens of gender and status, and demonstrates "the power and limits of reform" in early Edo Japan.

The chapters of *The Princess Nun* take both a chronological and thematic approach to Bunchi's life and practice. The first chapter begins with Bunchi's birth and concludes in Chapter Ten with her death and

¹ Western Illinois University. F-Pamonag@wiu.edu.

legacy. Chapter Three, Chapter Four, and Chapter Five provide context and an understanding of Bunchi's reformist practice through a consideration of courtly Buddhism and the competing ideas on what should be Buddhism's place in the new Tokugawa regime as articulated by the court, shogunate, and reformist monks like Isshi Bunshu, Bunchi's teacher. Chapters Six to Nine constitute the heart of Cogan's monograph, with discussions on reclusion, precepts, and ordination – the main tenets of Bunchi's reformist practice.

Cogan's detailed analysis of Bunchi's practice as a nun illuminates the importance of the precept platform that she built for women. Bunchi made available to women an important element of monasticism that was previously inaccessible to them; the last known precept platform for women was built almost 400 hundred years prior to Enshōji's. Consequently, the nuns at Enshōji no longer had to go to a monastery in order to be ordained (227). Cogan points out, however, that during this time many women practiced as nuns outside the convents, living at home or going on the road as itinerant preachers and ascetics. Bunchi, therefore, provided some women an alternative route to becoming a nun, albeit in a way that reinforced the centrality of monasticism over lay life. Here, Cogan draws attention to Bunchi's use of "tradition as a vehicle to introduce innovation" (214), and only a few women were able to lead a monastic life. Cogan provides examples of some of the women who entered Enshōji at Shūgakuin, with social backgrounds that included connections to the shogun (159).

Cogan's monograph provides a rich historical context, which makes it easy for the reader to understand Bunchi's early life and life choices and, more importantly, the kind of reform she initiated. In Chapter Four, Cogan explores the reforms that Isshi (and Bunchi's contemporaries) advanced in order to set the context for understanding the similarities and differences in Isshi's and Bunchi's reclusive and precept-based practices, which are discussed in Chapter Six, "Reclusion and Spatiality" and Chapter Nine, "Precepts and Ordination at Enshōji,"

respectively. Cogan attributes the differences between Isshi's and Bunchi's practices primarily to Bunchi's gender and social position (154-155). One difference, as Cogan argues, was in the way that Bunchi oriented the reclusive aspect of her practice toward the court and imperial monasteries and convents, whereas Isshi's was oriented toward both the court and the larger Rinzai Zen monastic world (154). In Chapter Ten, "Bunchi at Court," Cogan cites evidence of Bunchi conducting rituals for the posthumous welfare of the deceased members of the court, including her benefactor, Tofukumon'in, in order to show that the court was the major beneficiary of Bunchi's practice. In another example that shows some differences in Bunchi's and Isshi's ascetic practices, Cogan points to Bunchi's decision to build a platform for the bodhisattva precepts, not the *Vinaya* precepts, which are at the center of Isshi's monastic practice (222). Cogan speculates that this was probably due to the high value Bunchi placed on the work of the Rinzai monk Kokan Shiren (222). Bunchi, Cogan argues, was able to differentiate her ascetic practice from Isshi's because she was a member of the sovereign's family and utilized the resources and connections with the court, as well as with the shogunate.

To further demonstrate the importance of the court to Bunchi's ascetic practice, Cogan cites Bunchi's decision to build her convent at Shūgakuin, only three miles from the court. Isshi had discouraged Bunchi from building the convent in this location because of its proximity to the court; however, such a location satisfied Bunchi's desire to be separate from the court while still being within its gaze. Cogan suggests that this was crucial to Bunchi because the court was her main source of funding, and Cogan provides ample evidence to show the enormous amount of financial and other kinds of support that Bunchi received from her uncles, siblings, and Tofukumon'in. Cogan also uses the case of Tofukumon'in, the daughter of the second shogun Tokugawa Hidetada who entered the court as Go-Mizunoo's official consort, to reveal that the shogunate, through the urging of Tofukumon'in, provided financial support to Enshōji that ensured its financial stability

for years. By citing Bunchi's decision to build Enshōji at Shūgakuin, Cogan also demonstrates that Bunchi was not a passive recipient of Isshi's advice and teachings.

A common theme throughout this book is the permeability of the boundary between the secular and religious worlds, between the shogunate and the court. In Chapter Seven, Cogan explores the surroundings and people who inhabited Enshōji, arguing that "for all its rhetorical distance from the dusty world, Enshōji was deeply connected to that very world" (165). To illustrate the close link between the lay and religious worlds, Cogan shows that Enshōji's move from Shūgakuin to Nara in the 1650s was made possible by Bunchi's vast network of connection to the court and the shogunate. In addition, as Cogan points out, the rules and regulations at Enshōji demonstrate that it was a mixed-sex community that included nuns as well as male administrators and laborers, and Bunchi exerted her authority over the entire community.

By examining the rules and regulations at Enshōji and their performance, Cogan's work demonstrates not only how lay and clerical boundaries were often crossed, but also the exercise of female Buddhist authority. Cogan makes extensive use of Bunchi's rules, especially the *Kanbun Four Regulations*, to analyze "Discipline and Community at Enshōji" in Chapter Eight. Bunchi, Cogan argues, "used her status as the abbess of a convent and as a member of the ruling class to legislate the behavior of those below her," men as well as women (195). For example, rules on surveillance urged all members of the community to keep "an eye out for infractions of the rules and reporting them when they happened" (206). As Cogan points out, the *Kanbun Four Regulations* cover various facets of daily life at Enshōji, but it was silent on the topic of sexual activity: It does not explicitly mention sexual relations or the possibility of sexual activity. Cogan considers a number of factors that may explain this silence, including the laymen's and kitchen nuns' short length of service and the temporal nature of their work (210-211). This

explanation seems to be out of place, however, if we consider that, as Cogan asserts,

[T]he behavior of the Enshōji community as a whole, in all aspects of its life, contributed to the atmosphere of ascetic discipline and purity that Bunchi needed in order to make sure the nation prospered and the dead were cared for (191).

Furthermore, Cogan makes extensive analysis of these regulations, which are suggestive of how Bunchi tried to assert her authority over the whole community, but they do not tell us how individual members deal with such rules and regulations. This chapter does not address this question in-depth, and it would have helped demonstrate the extent of Bunchi's authority (as a nun and as a member of the sovereign's family) within Enshōji. However, Cogan acknowledges that Bunchi's "repeated exhortations to report and confess transgressions" suggest that these rules were not always followed, especially by the lower-status groups (206), and that there might have been conflict among certain members of the community because "some articles of the rules allude to conflicts between senior nuns and the administrators" (207).

Cogan's work provides rich historical and historiographical contexts, but sometimes this becomes problematic when there is more discussion of context and less of historical evidence. For example, in her chapter on "Bunchi's Buddhist Education," there is little evidence of Bunchi hearing a lecture on the sutras when she was growing up in the court, and Cogan was reduced to speculating that "Bunchi would have..." or asserting that "she did grow up in a court that used sutras in ritual, social, and devotional contexts" (74, 76). Thus, Cogan turns to the works of scholars from other periods in Japanese history to piece together what Bunchi's education might have been like and what she might have seen at court. Although this may seem plausible, the lack of primary sources makes it difficult for Cogan to ascertain what Bunchi actually learned, studied or heard about Buddhism. Nonetheless, this chapter elucidates courtly Buddhism as practiced by Bunchi's father, Go-Mizunoo, and

shows the role that members of the court played in Buddhism and their utilization of Buddhist rituals for the welfare of the realm, as well as the importance of rituals to mark status in the court (89).

The concluding chapter emphasizes that the book offers a new way of thinking about identity formation by considering “what Bunchi had in common with her fellow imperial abbots and abbesses” (259). Cogan notes in the book’s introduction that “identity is created through difference and differentiation” (16); however, as she explains, in the concluding chapter, “too often, a focus on studying the formation of identity through difference can obscure what remained common to both the center and the margins, and to members of different segments of society” (259). In this book, Cogan demonstrates the complexity of Bunchi’s practice by showing how she differentiated herself from her imperial abbess sisters through her emphasis on reclusion, precepts, and ordination, although she also shared her fellow imperial abbots’ and abbesses’ concern for the posthumous welfare of the deceased members of the court.

Specialists and graduate students of Buddhism and women and religion will find valuable Cogan’s examination of Bunchi’s reformist practice in early modern Japan. Cogan’s work illuminates the complex workings of gender and status as they made possible and at the same time limited the kind of reform that Bunchi was able to carry out during the early Tokugawa period. It also demonstrates female Buddhist authority during a time when the Buddhist monastic mainstream was constituted as male. As such, it makes a significant contribution to scholarship on women and religion, in particular, and Buddhism in early modern Japan, in general. Furthermore, by shedding light on identity formation and the intersection of gender and status in early modern Japan, Cogan’s book should be of interest not only to specialists and students of religion, but also to those of social history. Lastly, the clear writing style, rich historical and historiographical contexts, and illumination of what historians refer to as the dual polity as the court

and the Tokugawa shogunate worked together, especially in areas of common interest, make Cogan's book an important resource to advanced undergraduate students of history of Japan and history of women and gender in Japan.