



John K. Nelson, *Experimental Buddhism: Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013. xxiv+292 pages. Cloth, \$60.00; paperback, \$32.00. ISBN 978-0-8248-3833-1 (cloth); 978-0-8248-3898-0 (paperback).

JAPANESE BUDDHISM is in dire financial straits. “Any temple with a constituency of less than 200 families in contemporary Japan cannot generate enough revenue through membership fees and donations to employ a full-time priest, support his family, maintain the buildings, and cover other expenses” (103–104). So what are Buddhist priests doing about it?

John K. NELSON’s earlier works (1996; 2000) have earned him a solid reputation for undertaking deeply textured, ethnographic analyses of Shinto as a living religion, a scholarly effort that he has achieved by employing the tools of sociology, anthropology, and documentary film-making. With his new book, Nelson brings these tools to bear on the practices of contemporary Buddhism. His key objective is to show how a small, but critical, minority of socially-active Buddhist priests are experimenting, in the face of a collapsing *danka* (temple patronage) system, with ways to make the temple a relevant site for contemporary Japanese. Focusing on a handful of priests as the “primary protagonists” (xv), Nelson argues that entrepreneurial Buddhist leaders “are not motivated by directives from the headquarters of their denominations” nor are they necessarily “inspired by core Buddhist teachings” (xviii). Rather, the meaningful connection between these priests—that is, the reason they comprise a coherent category of analysis—is that collectively their “effort to restructure temple and tradition represents an important conceptual shift in how priests see their roles in and duties to society” (20).

If Nelson argues that, on the whole, ethnographic scholarship “must alternate between magnifying glasses and telescopes” (xxii), the first three chapters are of the telescope variety. Chapter 1 (“Experimental Buddhism: Contexts and Trajectories”) introduces the concept of experimental Buddhism, which Nelson defines as “selective, pragmatic, and concerned primarily with achieving a satisfactory result that somehow improves human life or advances the agenda of an individual or group in ways thought to be beneficial” (21). Chapter 2 (“Japanese Versions of Buddhism”) explores how, since the late 1800s, “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 small businesses” (xv). This chapter details the various economic, legal, and institutional forces pushing contemporary Japanese priests to investigate partnerships with nongovernmental and not-for-profit organizations (NGOs and NPOs), whether as a way to pay overhead costs, to maintain their own special tax status, or simply to solve the “getting warm bodies through the doors” problem.

The last of the “telescope” chapters, “Social Welfare and Buddhist-Inspired Activism,” offers a very useful thumbnail sketch of Buddhist institutional history in Asia

that, rather than repeating a typical narrative of concepts and teachings (karma, the Four Noble Truths, and so on), instead charts general developments in Buddhism from the point of view of “the reciprocity of temple and society” (71). While something of a whirlwind tour, the chapter does provide a rough sketch of the rise of the idea of charity, an elaborate and expanded notion of merit, and a subsequent boom in monastic engagement in public works such as the building of bridges, latrines, stupas, gardens, and wells. This genealogy of social welfare and Buddhist-inspired activism on the Chinese continent in turn informs Nelson’s account of Japanese Buddhism, the history of which he describes in terms of developments pertaining to the alleviation of suffering. Nelson thus brings his study of contemporary monks working on suicide-prevention hotlines and developing end-of-life hospice facilities into conversation with scholarship on the classical and medieval practices of self-ordination (*jisei jukai*), “bodhisattva precepts,” and “non-affiliated fundraising monks” (*kanjin hijiri*). This chapter alone is worth the purchase price for the entire volume.

Nelson shifts to the “microscope” approach in chapter 4, offering, as the chapter title advertises, “Four Prototypes of Experimental Buddhism.” For Akita Mitsu-hiko, head priest of the Osaka Pure Land temple Ōtenin, the temple is a place of therapeutic play. Utilizing a revenue stream from a large, affiliated kindergarten, and partnering with an NPO, Akita’s organization hosts performance events, coordinates end-of-life care, and provides space for play therapy. Another reformer, Takahashi Takushi, head priest of Matsumoto’s Rinzai Zen temple Jingūji, works both close to home (advocating for greater transparency in temple finances for his denomination) and abroad (partnering, for instance, with an NGO to set up thyroid cancer screening services in post-meltdown Chernobyl). Hashimoto Junshin, of Nara’s Shingon school Jurin-in, has focused on providing “easy access to dharma” by opening drop-in community centers and storefront meet-a-monk events in shopping arcades. Perhaps the most eyebrow-raising of them all, for True Pure Land priest Kiyoshi Fumihiko of Osaka’s Zuikōji, the Buddhist institution of the twenty-first century is, as the popular refrain has it, a place “where everybody knows your name”: Kiyoshi counts a bar among his various initiatives to re-envision the temple as a place of “refuge and support” (137). Cheers to that.

Additionally, Nelson offers (in chapter 6) profiles of two other, younger priests: Miura Akari, a True Pure Land priest who has taken over her father’s leadership of a rural temple outside Osaka, and Kawakami Takafumi, who is training to assume leadership of the Rinzai Zen temple Shunkōin in Kyoto. A popular performer since her teen years and among the first wave of Japanese women to become temple priests, Miura has created a jazz- and folk-informed style of Buddhist ceremonial music and sees the temple as a place of aesthetic collaboration. Kawakami, on the other hand, has taken inspiration from the “meditation boom” (199) and the popularity of Zen he witnessed as an exchange student in the U.S. and gone on to create mixed yoga and Zen meditation retreats, while also reaching out to members of marginalized communities (for example, people in same-sex relationships or on active duty with the Self Defense Force).

Drawing together the implications of his work, Nelson characterizes these cutting-edge Buddhist priests as “religious entrepreneurs” who must “try to maximize their

benefits while carefully managing investments of time, money, and effort” (143). Looking forward, Nelson suggests that, in order to carve out a place for not just social survival but social relevance, Buddhist institutions, leaders, and priests in Japan will need to focus on three areas: addressing suffering in society, active involvement in public problems and concerns, and educational support, particularly in terms of fostering awareness of Japan’s cultural heritage and Buddhism’s contributions to it. In short, “If ordinary Buddhist temples in Japan are to survive ... their fate rests in part with the dispositions of individual priests charting a course toward more socially relevant and activist forms of their traditions” (212) as much as with the reformation of legal and financial structures which, together, would encourage greater collaboration between temples and nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations.

On the whole, Nelson provides a compelling narrative, weaving together an impressive array of multi-site, trans-sectarian ethnographic interviews with Buddhist entrepreneurs. *Experimental Buddhism* is accessible to a wide range of readers. It will no doubt be employed profitably in graduate seminars, and also could be used easily in undergraduate survey courses on Buddhism, contemporary religion, or modern Japan, whose students will benefit from features like the “executive summary” of Buddhist history in Japan (28–35), and the explicit discussion of methodology in the introduction. There are, however, a couple of weak areas. The author employs the endemically rather vague conceptual lens of “capitalist late modernity” as a framing device. Though not particularly important to his arguments, the underdeveloped theoretical material does, at times, add unnecessary snags to what is otherwise a fascinating set of ethnographic case studies. Perhaps due to this lack of a stronger theoretical framework, the last main chapter (chapter 5) becomes something of a laundry list of things innovative Buddhist leaders in twenty-first century Japan have tried, rather than offering a more far-reaching analysis. Nevertheless, these are relatively minor concerns for a book that does much to move a number of important scholarly conversations forward.

Many have noted and criticized the ways in which textual analysis of religious writings has long dominated the field of Buddhist studies. Nelson’s study bucks this trend, contributing to a small, but steadily growing, scholarly literature on Buddhism as a lived religion. His work thus features alongside that of Ian Reader, Duncan Williams, Steve Covell, Mark Rowe, Richard Jaffe, Jessica Starling, Shimazono Susumu, and Ueda Noriyuki. *Experimental Buddhism* also contributes to the growing body of scholarship attending to sometimes strident critiques of contemporary institutional Buddhism (as in works by David McMahan, James Mark Shields, Christopher Ives, and Jamie Hubbard). In sum, Nelson’s *Experimental Buddhism* is a lively and thought-provoking study of the ways in which some contemporary priests have attempted to counter the “gradual diminution of [the] temple’s social activity and presence” in Japanese communities, a contraction of social usefulness that has saddled temples with a “perceived monopoly on death-related rituals” (45). His interlocutors’ struggles to overcome this so-called “funeral problem” are at the heart and soul of this compelling and accessible study.

REFERENCES

NELSON, John K.

1996 *A Year in the Life of a Shintō Shrine*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

2000 *Enduring Identities: The Guise of Shinto in Contemporary Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Charlotte Eubanks
Penn State University