

Brian D. RUPPERT, *Jewel in the Ashes: Buddha Relics and Power in Early Medieval Japan*. Harvard East Asian Monographs 188. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000. xviii + 505 pp. \$52.00, cloth. ISBN 0-674-00245-8.

SCHOLARS OF JAPANESE religion often make the point that, unlike Western religions, Japanese religions are best approached not from the perspective of belief, but rather from the perspective of ritual praxis. The question is not “what do Japanese believe?” but rather “what is the nature of Japanese reli-

gious practice?” Despite general agreement on this point, Western scholars of Japanese religion—particularly of Japanese Buddhism—have tended to focus on Buddhist thought. There are few Western studies that examine Japanese Buddhist ritual practices and their rhetorical functions. Brian D. Ruppert’s volume on the study of Buddha relic worship in Heian and Kamakura period Japanese Buddhism is thus a major contribution to our understanding of the import of these practices in medieval Japan. His study explores ways in which aristocrats, monastics, and others created a ritual economy based on Buddha relics as the currency that purchased the benefits of ritual activity. His scholarship is important because it goes beyond mere description of ritual to delve into the ways relic worship was connected to economic, political, social, textual, and other aspects of Japanese culture.

Ruppert’s volume is concerned with what he refers to as the ritual economy of Japanese Buddhist relics. In this economy, relics served as the “currency” of ritual exchange. Monastics, members of the imperial court, and aristocratic families purchased material and spiritual benefits through rituals that revolved around the power attributed to Buddha relics. As Ruppert notes, “Buddha relics mediated tensions between different social groups and enabled figures such as fundraising monks or cloistered emperors to improve their social standing or overcome health problems” (10). In this way, power and authority were brokered in medieval Japan through Buddha relics—commodities that became intimately linked to the political and social agendas of aristocrats and warriors.

Jewel in the Ashes consists of eight chapters and end matter that includes a glossary of terms and translated excerpts from texts central to the book’s thesis. The first two chapters present introductory material. Chapter 1, “Introduction: Buddha Relics, Exchange, and the Value of Death,” describes Ruppert’s focus in this volume on “the attitudes of individuals and groups toward relics and reliquaries, along with the objects offered to them” (9). He emphasizes that the cult of Buddha relics in Japan encompassed diverse segments of the population over several centuries. Ruppert traces out central aspects of Buddha relic worship such as its gendered nature, its appeal to both laity and monastics, its embrace by both aristocrats and warriors, and its practice across Buddhist sects. Thus, Ruppert demonstrates how relic veneration was utilized in specific contexts in different times and places. As Ruppert makes clear, there was not a singular phenomenon called Japanese Buddha relic worship—rather this was a multivalent practice with diverse and multiple effects. Chapter 2, “The Continental Context: Buddha Relics in India and China,” outlines the continental Buddhist antecedents to Japanese Buddha relic worship and reviews some of the narratives central to these practices.

The remaining chapters, as Ruppert notes, “show how the economy of relics in early Japan incorporated many of the same narratives and ritual practices found in India and China while at the same appropriating them to a novel Japanese context” (9). Chapter 3, “Buddha Relics as Imperial Treasures: *Ichidai ichido busshari hōken*,” examines the development of Buddha relic worship in Japan. Ruppert focuses here on the Buddha Relics Offering (*ichidai*

ichido busshari hōken 一代一度仏舎利奉献). This ritual was performed during imperial accessions as “part of a ritual effort to confirm the legitimacy of imperial rule” (44). Ruppert argues that the need for this ritual was at least partly connected to the dissolution of power of the Ritsuryō 律令 government and the rise of Fujiwara power. He asserts that such power transitions were marked in part by the development of new state-sponsored rituals such as the Buddha Relics Offering. This ritual also included offerings made to shrines. Over time, Ruppert notes, “Buddha relics had become part and parcel of the imperial cult and the religious economy of state-shrine relations” (94).

Chapter 3 emphasizes Ruppert’s perspective that although Buddha relic offerings were derived from continental Buddhist practices, by the mid-Heian period relic rituals had become closely linked to indigenous traditions that incorporated trafficking in treasures for ritual benefit. For example, the practice of offering relics on the occasion of the imperial accession serves as evidence of this appropriation of a mainland Buddhist practice to meet Japanese needs. As Ruppert comments, “It was the interpretation and appropriation of Buddha relics as treasures of the imperial line that proved to be a ritual innovation of the Heian court” (97).

Chapter 4, “Buddha Relics as Esoteric Treasures: The Latter Seven-Day Rite and the Inventory of Buddha Relics,” explores how the “mid-Heian court appropriated Buddha relics as esoteric treasures. Clerics, aristocrats, and the imperial family believed that the worship and enclaving of Buddha relics would regenerate the body of the emperor as well as enrich and protect the state and realm” (103). Besides using relics to mark and affirm imperial accession, the Heian court initiated performance of a ritual known as the Latter Seven-Day Rite (*go-shichinichi mishiho* 後七日御修法). Originally performed by the Shingon founder Kūkai in 835, this Buddha relics ritual “was conducted by monks of the Shingon temple Tō-ji 東寺 for the regeneration of the emperor, state, and realm in the Shingon chapel (Shingon-in 真言院) of the greater imperial palace” (102). According to Ruppert, by the tenth century, Buddha relic worship was central to this ritual. No doubt this practice bolstered the power and authority of both emperors and Shingon monastics because of the close connections that developed between the aristocratic, imperial Latter Seven-Day Rite and the esoteric traditions of Tō-ji. Ruppert’s evidence suggests that “by the late eleventh century, relics were regularly parceled out by Tōji abbots in distribution (*bujō* 奉請) to emperors, cloistered emperors, and high-ranking aristocrats and clerics” (102).

Chapter 5, “Buddha Relics as Objects of Contention: Wish-Fulfilling Jewel Worship and the Genealogy of Relic Theft,” concerns the increasing regard for relics as treasures of great spiritual and material worth and the concurrent rise of relic thefts in the twelfth century. Since relics were an important symbol of imperial power and authority, it is not surprising that individuals at other levels of medieval Japanese society also came to covet such objects. Thus, the salvific and economic value of relics spread beyond the imperial family. Monks and laypersons, for instance, began to worship Buddha relics as wish-fulfilling jewels (*nyoi hōju* 如愛宝珠). Ruppert states that by the late

Heian and early Kamakura periods there was a conflation of wish-fulfilling jewels and Buddha relics. In Japan, wish-fulfilling jewels were Buddha relics fashioned with valuable materials and with substances considered to have medical efficacy. Further, the association of wish-fulfilling jewels with the bodhisattva Kannon no doubt heightened the popularity—and perceived potency—of Buddha relics. The perceived economic value of Buddha relics was thus partly material and partly spiritual. Competition over relics—and their theft—was one of the results of this synthesis of material and spiritual power.

Ruppert also discusses the development of competing traditions of wish-fulfilling jewel lineages. Competition between Shingon lineages for ritual prominence was especially fierce. Such struggles centered on access to jewels and claims to their authenticity and power. Ruppert remarks that the “development of traditions concerning multiple jewels paralleled the crystallization of lineages that increasingly splintered Shingon and the court during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries” (169). In effect, rifts in monastic and court alliances can be uncovered simply by following the jewels.

Both monastics and aristocratic lay Buddhists made use of the power of wish-fulfilling jewels and Buddha relics. Ruppert’s discussion of a work by Ōe no Chikamichi 大江親通 (d. 1151), *Issai sharira shū* 一切舍利羅集 (Comprehensive collection on relics), is especially helpful in understanding the value of relics from a lay perspective. Based on his reading of Chikamichi’s work, Ruppert cites four reasons for the value of relics: 1) the relic has apotropaic qualities whereby it “enables the worshipper to avert illness, pacify the world, and lengthen his or her life”; 2) the relic is fecund: “it transforms into the five grains, ensures rain, and even grants benefits during Last Age”; 3) the relic has economic value: “it fulfills the believer’s desires, produces jewels, and itself becomes a wish-fulfilling jewel”; and 4) the relic is purificatory because “its worship can expiate the believer’s transgressions” (175). These four valuations attest to the multiple levels of worth the laity assigned to Buddha relics.

Chapter 6, “Lineage and Gender in the Economy of Relics,” explores relic veneration as a gendered activity, especially imperial and aristocratic women’s patronage of relic worship rites. Discussion focuses on ways in which women gained access to salvation through relic worship. Such worship may have produced spiritual benefits for its practitioners, but material benefits were also noteworthy. For instance, relic worship was thought to help assure safe childbirth. Yet, as Ruppert points out, relic rites linked to childbirth were not only intended to improve the well-being of women, but were also important in perpetuating the lineages of aristocratic families. Ruppert argues that “[t]hese traditions attest to the power of relics to mediate social relations in multiple ways and suggest that by worshipping relics, women were attempting to maintain the lineage of the imperial and Fujiwara houses. At the same time, these rites provided women a critical avenue for gaining Buddhist salvation” (192).

Chapter 7, “Rebirth of the Warrior-King: Samurai Society and the Powers of Buddha Relics,” studies the appropriation of relic worship by Kamakura

and Ashikaga shoguns and warrior houses who were “well aware of the representational and ritual connection between relic veneration and acknowledgment of the authority of the ruler” (230). Veneration of relics and reliquary construction were central in establishing the Kamakura shogunate’s claims to legitimate ruling authority. The shogunate “tried to produce a set of religious sites and performative rituals that visually attested to its authority in the Kamakura area, and it used relics and reliquaries as primary means toward this end” (231). Ruppert details the different ways in which this agenda was carried out, including sponsorship of relic rituals at Kamakura area temples connected with the warrior government and construction of 84,000 miniature reliquaries. Through such activities, the Kamakura shogunate—and later the Ashikaga—appropriated Buddha relic worship for its own social and political aims, constructing a specific system of patronage that was disassociated from older relic rites connected with legitimation of the imperial line.

Chapter 8, “Conclusion: Buddha Relics and the Ritual Economy in Early Medieval Japan,” provides further reflections on the use of “relics as a medium for understanding the construction of relations of power in early medieval Japan” (278).

This brief chapter review sketches only the broad contours of Ruppert’s study and therefore glosses over much of the rich detail that enlivens this compelling examination of Buddha relic worship in medieval Japan. One of this volume’s significant contributions is its interrogation of the complexities and issues surrounding what Ruppert refers to as the “multivocality” of Buddha relics. Rather than characterizing the Japanese relic economy as a monolithic phenomenon, Ruppert reveals the multiple phenomena of relic worship in medieval Japan. Power and control of Buddha relics—and the ritual activities that surrounded them—shifted in various political and social contexts. While the relic activities of imperial and aristocratic families, of shoguns and warriors, of monastic and lay Buddhist men and women, centered on commonly held notions about the efficacy of Buddha and the metonymic relics, all participants in this ritual economy “saw something different in relics and appropriated them accordingly, while associating them with the authority and powers of the Buddha” (11). In sum, Ruppert does a commendable job of guiding us through the thicket of interpretations and ritual uses of Buddha relics in medieval Japan. *Jewel in the Ashes* merits reading for anyone wishing to better understand medieval Japanese Buddhist practices in general and the commoditization of Buddha relics in particular.

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