



Kenji Matsuo, *A History of Japanese Buddhism*

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MATSUO KENJI IS a prolific scholar who has written extensively on medieval Japanese Buddhism, most notably on the medieval Ritsu school of Eizon (1201–1290) and Ninshō (1217–1303). According to the preface, this is his seventeenth book and his first in English. (For the record, it may be mentioned here that he has published two more books in Japanese after the volume under review was published). In this book, he presents an overview of Japanese Buddhism using his distinctive official monk/reclusive monk paradigm which, he maintains, is the most fruitful model for understanding the history of this religion in Japan. Matsuo has previously discussed this paradigm in English, but in this volume he uses it as an interpretive model for analyzing the entire history of Japanese Buddhism.¹

Although Matsuo's study is roughly arranged according to chronological order, it is not a conventional narrative history of Japanese Buddhism. Rather, as he says, its focus is on the "life, activity and role" of Japanese Buddhist monks. Inasmuch as the monks are the primary agents of both the transmission and transformation of Buddhism, he focuses on their lives and the role they played in society to discuss how Japanese Buddhism functioned and changed with the times.

As noted above, the underlying paradigm of this book is the distinction Matsuo draws between official monks (*kansō* 官僧) and reclusive monks (*tonsesō* 遁世僧).

1. See Matsuo Kenji, "What is Kamakura New Buddhism?" *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 24: 179–189 (1997), and "Official Monks and Reclusive Monks," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 64/3: 369–80 (2001).

The former refer to those monks who were appointed by the state and received ordination at one of the officially sanctioned ordination platforms, such as those located at Tōdaiji and Enryakuji. As Matsuo notes, Japanese Buddhism developed as a state religion, and the main duties of an official monk was to pray for the well-being of the state centering on the emperor. Hence, official monks were essentially civil servants and received payment from the state for their participation in national religious services. On the other hand, reclusive monks referred to those who had “dropped out” of this system of official monks. The reclusive monks were even visually different from the official monks, inasmuch as the former wore black robes, in contrast to the latter, who wore white robes. Based on the fact that virtually all of the historically significant monks of the Kamakura period were reclusive monks, Matsuo proposes that reclusive monks supplanted the official monks as the central figures in the religious scene during the medieval period, resulting in the dramatic transformation of Japanese Buddhism during the Kamakura age. In other words, it was the reclusive monks who “were responsible for producing and propelling Kamakura New Buddhism” (55). Moreover, Matsuo argues that this official monk/reclusive monk paradigm helps resolve a number of inconsistencies that have plagued Kuroda Toshio’s well known exoteric/esoteric theory of medieval Japanese Buddhism.

Matsuo argues that reclusive monks were able to become the leading figures of medieval Buddhism because their status offered them opportunities to engage in activities that were prohibited to official monks. In particular, they were free from fears of becoming ritually polluted. As mentioned above, the main duty of official monks was to perform prayers for the state, but in order for their prayers to be effective, they had to maintain their ritual purity by keeping away from sources of pollutions, most notably corpses and women. However, since reclusive monks had no need to engage in state prayers and were therefore free from the restrictions placed on official monks, they were free to conduct funerals and proselytize among women. Hence they were able to respond more effectively to the spiritual needs of medieval Japan.

Matsuo expands on this thesis in the sixteen chapters that make up this volume. The first preliminary chapter, “Characteristics of Japanese Buddhism,” outlines the distinctive features of Japanese monks (or *obōsan* in Japanese), and provides much interesting information about their names, robes, the function of the temples and other topics. Matsuo begins to develop his thesis in earnest in the second chapter, “Ancient Buddhism—Official Monks.” Here he outlines the main contours of the history of Japanese Buddhism during the ancient period (up to the end of the twelfth century) and argues that the dominant Buddhist figures of this period were the official monks. In the next chapter, “Official and Reclusive Monks,” Matsuo turns to the middle ages (which he defines as lasting from the end of the twelfth century to the end of the sixteenth century) and develops his argument that the reclusive monks were the main force behind the far-reaching religious innovations of this

period, including the rise of the numerous schools of the so-called Kamakura New Buddhism.

The brief fourth chapter, “Medieval Japanese Towns and the Rise of Kamakura New Buddhism,” explores the close relationship between reclusive monks and growth of urban centers. Here Matsuo argues that the growth of the new schools of Kamakura Buddhism was made possible by the rise of the “individual,” which he believes is closely associated with the growth of urban centers. He also notes that the temples of the new Kamakura schools (such as those of the nenbutsu and Zen schools) were located on the fringes of the towns, which allowed them to engage in funeral services. Since contact with the dead was considered highly polluting, funerals could not be performed in the town center. For this reason, Matsuo concludes that the temples of the new Kamakura schools played an important role in purifying the town’s defilements.

After an informative fifth chapter on the temples of Kamakura entitled “Field-work in Kamakura,” the author takes up in the sixth chapter the interesting question of the color of the robes worn by official and reclusive monks. According to the Buddhist precepts, a monk’s robe had to be dyed in the so-called “defiled colors” (*ejiki* 壞色) such as blue, black and madder-red (deep purple). In Japan, the color of the official monks’ robes were fixed by the *sōniryō* 僧尼令 (Regulations for monks and nuns) which formed a part of the Japanese legal codes. According to the *sōniryō*, the robes had to be madder-red, blue-green, ink black or yellow. However, from the tenth century on, the official monks’ robes became white, a color which is both associated with purity and linked to the emperor. In contrast, reclusive monks wore robes dyed black, a defiled color. Interestingly, however, court nobles of the fourth rank and above also wore black robes, indicating that this color was associated with the notion of nobility as well.

Next, in the following four chapters, Matsuo discusses some of the characteristic activities of reclusive monks, such as their roles in fund-raising (*kanjin*) activities, in the salvation of outcasts and women and in the performance of funerals. These are arguably the central chapters of the book. These topics have recently attracted the attention of a number of scholars of Japanese Buddhism. However, Matsuo sheds new light on these activities by placing them in the context of his official monk/reclusive monk paradigm. In other words, he argues that whereas official monks were unable to engage in funerals or in welfare activities for outcasts and women because these activities were believed highly polluting, reclusive monks were able to do so because they were free from fears of becoming ritually impure.

The chapter on fund-raising activities by reclusive monks focuses on Chōgen (1121–1206) who rebuilt the Todaiji and its statue of the Great Buddha at the beginning of the Kamakura period, the Zen monk Eisai who succeeded Chōgen as *dai-kanji* 大勧進 (chief fund-raiser) after the latter’s death and Ninshō of the Ritsu school. The chapter also contains an interesting analysis of the famous ballad of Sanshō Dayū, which may have been created and sung by reclusive monks charged

with raising contribution for rebuilding the Shitennōji in Osaka and the *kokubunji* 国分寺 (provincial temple) of Tango, both of which appears in the ballad.

Chapter eight, “Salvation of Outcastes,” highlights the activities of Ritsu monks, who worked for the salvation of outcastes by building bathhouses for their use and by conducting prayers for their salvation. However, as Matsuo notes, the Ritsu monks were not the only ones concerned with the welfare of the outcastes. Nenbutsu monks, including Hōnen, Shinran, and Ippen, and Shingon monks, such as Myōe—all of whom were reclusive monks—were engaged in the salvation of outcastes. Likewise, many of the leading reclusive monks of the Kamakura period were deeply committed to working for the salvation of women. Their activities are described at length in chapter 9, “The Salvation of Women.” Despite the fact that the first ordained Buddhists, such as Zenshin-ni, were women, women were forbidden to receive ordination at the state ordination platforms and were excluded from entering major temples like Enryakuji and Tōdaiji. Once again, it was the reclusive monks who took the lead in preaching the possibility that women can gain salvation and working of their behalf. Similarly, the reclusive monks were frequently employed to conduct funerals. As mentioned above, it was because they were free from fears of becoming ritually impure that they were able to come in contact with the dead and engage in funerals for their behalf.

The rest of the chapters in this volume (chapters eleven to sixteen) bring us up to present-day Japan. Although they contain a wealth of information about various monks, I will refrain from discussing them in detail here.

In conclusion, it can be said that Matsuo’s book is a useful addition to studies on medieval Japanese Buddhism. His unique official monk/reclusive monk paradigm provides us with a fruitful perspective from which to analyze Japanese Buddhist history, and the volume contains a wealth of interesting anecdotes on the lives and activities of individual monks. Anyone interested in the state of the field will find it to be a handy guide to the various issues engaging the attention of Japanese Buddhist scholars today.

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