



**Stephen G. Covell, *Japanese Temple Buddhism: Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation***

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THE DEATH OF Japanese Buddhism is well attested. A list of causes usually includes one or more of the following: the temple certification (*terauke seido* 寺受け制度) of the Tokugawa period; the widespread attacks on Buddhist temples (*haibutsu kishaku* 俳仏毀釈) in the early Meiji period; the attempts, both internal and external, to purge Buddhism of its supposed superstitious trappings at the turn of the last century; and the popular view of contemporary Buddhism encapsulated in pejorative expressions such as “funerary Buddhism” (*sōshiki Bukkyō* 葬式仏教) and “profiteering monks” (*marumōke bōzu* 丸儲け坊主). Indeed, Buddhism in Japan has been continually bound up in a modernist narrative of decline that has persisted to the current day and has, along with other factors such as the post-war successes of Japanese New Religions, meant an almost complete lack of attention paid to contemporary forms. While dominant memes such as “new Kamakura Buddhism” have received extended critical review, twentieth-century Japanese Buddhism has been almost entirely neglected by scholars, both in Japan and the West.

Enter Stephen Covell's excellent study of post-war Japanese Tendai—to my knowledge, the first full-length treatment of a contemporary Japanese Buddhist sect in either English or Japanese. As the subtitle suggests, a central theory of the book is that contemporary Tendai is caught up in a bind between the “traditional” image of themselves as world-renouncing monks—as seen, for example, in the use of mountain ascetic (*kaihōgyō* 回峰行) imagery in sectarian promotion—and the daily activities of temples promoting this-worldly benefits and conducting funerals. We

are presented, then, not with a dead tradition but rather one very much alive and trying to maintain its doctrinal ideals while remaining relevant to the secular lives of parishioners, and, as Covell makes clear, temple priests. The main narrative thread of *Temple Buddhism* is not decay, but tension—a tension that provides a fascinating variety of materials with which to think not only about Japanese Buddhism, but also about questions in the study of religion more generally.

By eschewing the premise that contemporary Buddhism in Japan is not “really Buddhist,” Covell is able to fruitfully explore a number of significant issues confronting not only Tendai but all of the Buddhist sects. These issues include the economic effects of land reform measures after World War Two, urbanization, shifting demographics, shrinking families, institutional structures imposed by the Religious Corporations Law (*shūkyō hōjinhō* 宗教法人法), changes in community organization, the rise of the funeral industry, and new patterns of religious affiliation and expression. As such, we are provided with a number of subjects not commonly covered in the study of Buddhism, including questions of taxation, formalization of fees for religious services, issues surrounding temple families, concerns over priestly training and succession, and attempts to redefine temple affiliation.

Space does not permit a detailed summary of all the chapters, but I would like to touch on a couple of topics in the book that add new dimensions to our understanding of contemporary Tendai. In Chapter Three, Covell details Tendai’s “Light Up Your Corner Movement” (*ichigū o terasu undō* 一隅を照らす運動), a movement initially founded by priests in Tokyo to spread Tendai teachings but was later adopted by sect leaders to promote Tendai identity, strengthen parishioner involvement, and combat what were seen as the social ills of modernization. Similar to popularizing activities started by all the major sects in the 1960s and 1970s, such movements were mobilized in part to combat what was seen as the threat posed by the New Religions and to respond to the needs of an increasingly industrialized and commercialized society. In the efforts of the Light Up Your Corner Movement, the reader is provided with a unique view of institutional attempts to mold doctrinal ideals into contemporary forms. More strikingly, we are provided with, in the sect’s attempt to repackage itself as a people’s movement, the significant insight that one of the central problems facing the sects of traditional Buddhism is not necessarily the need to gain broader membership but rather the need to establish a relationship with its own parishioners. Indeed, it is not, we discover, those members of other sects or New Religions who must be converted, but Tendai parishioners themselves (60).

In Chapter Seven, Covell utilizes the contentious issue of temples and taxation to open up a discussion into the practical aspects of the secular/religious divide. Analyzing the acrimonious battle over tax revenues between the Kyoto city government and local temples that grew particularly heated in the 1980s and 1990s, Covell calls into question any facile distinction between tourism and religion. As he puts it, “Were Buddhist temples merely secularized tourist spots, or did they reflect a new form of personalized religious practice based on commodity exchange...?” Here again, the fact that temples were involved in supposed secular affairs, in this

case political battles with city officials over temple admission practices, is not taken as definitive proof of Buddhist decline but rather as an opportunity to explore the actual dynamics of religion and politics in contemporary Japan, a subject that certainly deserves further investigation.

Overall, this book provides a much needed portrait of the Tendai sect as an organization—one that is bound by laws (economic, biological, and legal), encased in bureaucracy, and struggling with its identity in a nation where ways of life and community have changed in fundamental and drastic ways over the last sixty years. Covell broaches the question that should be fundamental to any study of contemporary Buddhist organizations: what does Tendai (or Pure Land or Nichiren) Buddhism actually signify in contemporary Japan? What does it mean to belong to the Tendai sect, not only for its members, but also for its priests and its leaders? Covell's response identifies the challenge facing future scholarship in this area: "Tendai is perhaps best understood as a collection of separate temples, all of the Tendai 'brand name,' but each very much indebted to local customs, practices, and needs. The sect headquarters is rarely capable of one-sided administration.... It is also difficult for the sect to present a single message that is readily grasped and quickly of use to individuals in need of guidance" (40). The challenge, then, is to find meaningful ways to talk about "Tendai Buddhism" while acknowledging the multitude of practices (textual, oral, political, ritual, and economic to name but a few) that take part in that unified title. Interestingly, this is precisely the problem that faces scholars of Buddhism working in other cultures and time periods, even those considered "golden ages" of the tradition.

Readers should be aware that as the first foray into this material, this book is intended to break ground for future research—something the author clearly acknowledges in the epilogue, where he suggests possibilities for additional research of the topics raised in each chapter. In addition to the author's suggestions, and as a way to offer some critique of the book, I would like to make two further suggestions.

One way in which ethnographic work can contribute to our understanding of contemporary temple Buddhism is by exploring how the concerns and practices of priests vary depending on the wealth of a temple and the area in which it is located. Differences between wealthy and poor temples and between those located in rural and urban areas are often far more significant than any sectarian divisions. Although we are provided with an intriguing overview of priestly income in Chapter Seven, one is left wanting a more detailed understanding of how temple practices and priestly views of a sect might change depending on the wealth and location of a temple. A second area in which further research should prove very fruitful concerns the various ways in which temple Buddhism envisions, interacts with, and imitates the new religious movements. In *Temple Buddhism*, much of the information about the challenge posed by new religions seems to come from Buddhist sources. It would be helpful both to frame certain types of statements in terms of internal sectarian discourse as well as to see some more survey data supporting and detailing the belief

widespread among the traditional sects that they are losing much of their membership to new religious groups.

In the last several years there have been a number of books in Japanese suggesting a renaissance of Japanese Buddhism. As Sueki Fumihiko has pointed out recently in regards to UEDA Nobuyuki's *Ganbare Bukkyō* (2004), many of these books tend to downplay or critique the dominant role of Buddhism today in mortuary rites (SUEKI 2006, 82). One could also go further and point out that books such as *Ganbare Bukkyō*, in its focus on a small number of priests following innovative strategies such as starting up NPOs or opening their temples to theatre troupes, though fascinating, fit into a larger trend in publications on the imminent demise of contemporary Japanese Buddhism. Rather than taking these books as a sign of Buddhist resurgence, they might better be seen as part of a growing genre of literature that purports to warn the established sects that if they do not make significant changes, they will all disappear. It also bears noting that books claiming renaissance are implicitly reinforcing the decline narrative no less willingly than those warning of Buddhism's imminent demise.

*Japanese Temple Buddhism* skillfully manages to avoid both extremes, neither buying into the decline narrative pessimism nor the renaissance exuberance. Instead, Covell concentrates on the problems facing contemporary Tendai without reducing complex social and institutional changes to a simple continuum of decline and resurgence. By avoiding any normative stance on what constitutes "true" Buddhism in Japan and instead providing a nuanced examination of a sect struggling to adjust to drastic social, economic, and demographic change, Covell's work engages with the broader methodological trend in Religious Studies to approach religion not as something separate from everyday life but as something most fruitfully explored as enmeshed in the everyday.

#### REFERENCES

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