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Of Separate Places

Bessho in Early Medieval Japan

Bessho, or "separate places," were hermitages—places for Buddhist reclusion—occupied by reclusive monks in medieval Japan. *Bessho* spread throughout the Japanese archipelago from the eleventh through thirteenth centuries. They were remarkably diverse in their institutional status, associated religious practices, and personnel. Previous interpretations have focused on the role of *bessho* in relation to major sects and institutions, which has limited our capacity to explain their diversity and its impact. Through examining descriptions of *bessho* in relation to the wilderness in medieval primary sources, this article argues that *bessho* can be understood as a discourse about places of distance. As places of distance, *bessho* afforded opportunities for monks to engage in a wider variety of activities and forms of social engagement than were possible at major monasteries. This approach enables me to explain the diversity of this phenomenon and the role of *bessho* in the development of medieval Japanese Buddhism.

keywords: *bessho*—*tonseisō*—reclusion—*kenmitsu*—medieval Buddhism

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Although monasticism has been a hallmark of Buddhist traditions, the renunciation of secular life was, for certain practitioners, not enough. For many, the great achievement of salvation required greater sacrifice: withdrawal to places far removed from the bustle of towns and monasteries, where they could devote themselves to rigorous and introspective isolation. From the forest dwellers (*araṇyavāsin*) of early Mahāyāna narratives to the Chan poet-recluses of medieval China, it is hard to deny the importance of the hermit and the hermitage in the Buddhist world and its stories.

This applies particularly to medieval Japan. Toward the end of the Heian period, reclusive monks (*tonseisō* 遁世僧)—often called *shōnin* 上人, *jikyōsha* 持経者 (Kikuchi 2014), or *bessho hijiri* 別所聖—took center stage as leading figures, championing new forms of political dissent, cultural production, and religious community. As a rejection of the great bastions of Buddhist orthodoxy and the prevailing social order, the very state of religious withdrawal was a political act, advocating "an 'alternate space' and a 'counterideology to power'" (Brown 1997, 44). Like their predecessors on the continent who shirked their official duties to focus on literary and moral cultivation, giving rise to new forms of Chinese literature inspired by reclusion (*in'itsu bungaku* 隠逸文学), medieval Japanese recluses were at the forefront of new types of literature in poetry and free-form prose (Berkowitz 2000). An entire genre with a decidedly Buddhist flavor focused on the theme of the impermanent "thatched hut" (*sōan bungaku* 草庵文学) defined the trajectory of aesthetic traditions for many centuries to come (Stoneman 2008, 33–34). Relative to official monks, these figures also had considerable mobility, moving across social and geographic boundaries to study and minister to the wider medieval population. Matsuo Kenji has gone so far as to argue that the hordes of monks who sought to escape the official priesthood to live as recluses were the true protagonists of late-Heian Buddhism, being largely responsible for the changes associated with medieval Buddhism, particularly its direction toward the general populace (Matsuo 2001, 371–372).

The hermitages to which reclusive monks would withdraw to build their rustic huts and chapels—the cradles for many of the above developments—were known as *bessho* 別所, literally "separate places." Coinciding with the rising popularity of reclusion, *bessho* spread widely throughout the Japanese archipelago from the eleventh through thirteenth centuries. Situated near remote mountain hamlets and agricultural estates, *bessho* were ostensibly separate from the regulations, administrative commitments, and orthodoxies that framed monastic

and court life alike. In their separation from major urban and monastic centers, many *bessho* were established as areas for independent religious pursuits, while others, to the contrary, operated as subordinate institutions of larger monasteries, spearheading their attempts to obtain land and influence in the peripheries. While there have been significant advances in research on Buddhist recluses, there has been little research on *bessho*, which remains an ill-defined category in the history of Japanese religions despite their clear importance for understanding the role of reclusion and reclusive monks in the making of medieval Japanese Buddhism.

This article addresses exactly what *bessho* were and what they meant to early medieval Japanese Buddhists. My central argument is that a focus on the rhetorical, rather than the institutional or sectarian, features of *bessho* in medieval Japanese writings can illuminate their significance in Japanese Buddhism and society. I focus specifically on the multidimensional meanings of *bessho*—and their related discourses—as places of *distance*. This distance, which was distinctly rhetorical and relative, was articulated through the association of *bessho* with the wildernesses of the medieval Japanese provinces and the ancient Buddhist past. In their distance, *bessho* became open refuges for reclusive monks to interact with practitioners and practices from a wide variety of backgrounds.

By suggesting discourse, rather than sects or institutions, as central for understanding the place of *bessho* in Japanese religious history, my argument is presented as follows: I first present the problem of the inherent diversity of *bessho* and discuss previous approaches to *bessho*, which have overlooked this diversity in favor of examining their sectarian and institutional features; I then introduce my own approach to *bessho* as a discourse about places of distance through examining their representations as wildernesses in early medieval primary sources such as *komonjo* 古文書 and *ōjōden* 往生伝; and a final discussion section reflects on the implications of this approach. As places of distance, *bessho* afforded opportunities to reclusive monks that were quite distinct from those available at the great temples. Their socially varied and trans-sectarian atmospheres were characterized by the interplay of reclusive isolation and social interaction. Explaining this dual function of *bessho* allows me to illustrate how they came to occupy the center of many developments associated with medieval Japanese society and religion.

The Diversity of Bessho

From about the middle of the eleventh century, places called *bessho* began to pop up throughout the Japanese archipelago. Extant writings attest to the existence of at least eighty sites called *bessho* that were established and occupied by reclusive

monks by the end of the twelfth century (Takagi 1973, 355–356).[1] Perhaps because many of these recluses had previously served as official monks, *bessho* were often connected to larger monasteries: the places from which they were initially "separate." Aside from their associations with recluse monks and Buddhist temples, it is exceedingly difficult to pin down *bessho* as deriving from a single Buddhist school, form of temple management, or type of religious practice. *Bessho* were a fundamentally varied and multifarious phenomenon.

Bessho spread throughout the Japanese provinces from the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries. There was the Konkōin *nishi bessho* 金光院西別所 connected to Hōryūji 法隆寺, appearing as early as 1072 as a site for *hijiri* to recite the *nenbutsu* 念仏 and the preformance of *mukaekō* 迎講, a ritual dramatization of *raigō* 来迎 (Kojima 1980; Horton 2004, 41); there was also the Ryōsenji *bessho* 霊山寺別所 in Satsuma in southern Kyushu, appearing first in 1220 and later connected to Shugendo on Mount Hiko 英彦 (Takagi 1973, 348); and, more famously, the *shin bessho* 新別所 outside of Shitennōji's 四天王寺 western gate, where pilgrims frequented to sing the *nenbutsu* (zgr 27: 334; *Taiki*, 185), to practice *nissōkan* 日想観, a contemplation of the westerly setting sun from the western gate in emulation of the *Sutra of the Visualization of Amitayus* (t 365, 12.342), or, as in the case of the recluse Sainen 西念 (d. 1142), expedited their birth into Amida's Pure Land by drowning themselves in the waves of Naniwa Bay (*Sō Sainen konshi kinji kuyō mokuroku*, 39).

The distribution of *bessho* across time and space transcended sectarian boundaries. Some were branch institutions connected to Enryakuji 延暦寺, such as the Taimyōji *bessho* 台明寺別所, a center for the practice of continual *nenbutsu* chanting (*fudan nenbutsu* 不断念仏) in Ōsumi 大隅, near the Kirishima 霧島 stratovolcanoes in southern Kyushu (*Heian ibun* 5, no. 2205); there was also the Seiryō *bessho* 芹生別所, located on land managed by Enryakuji's Shōrin'in 勝林院, where groups of hermits convened to copy sutras for burial at other sites connected to *bessho* in distant provinces, such as Kokawadera 粉河寺 (Miyake 1983, 24; nst 20: 63). We can also take, for example, the seven *bessho* established by Chōgen 重源 (1121–1206), which he outlined in his *Namuamidabutsu sazenshū* (274–277). These were established as part of his efforts to raise funds (*kanjin* 勧進) and mobilize construction materials to reconstruct Tōdaiji 東大寺 and the Great Buddha following their destruction during the Genpei War (1180–1185). There were also the *bessho* on Mount Kōya 高野 with hermits building huts on

1. There are many more sites referred to as *bessho* that are unaccounted for in this number. There is a theory that many of the upwards of six hundred sites across Japan called *bessho* were originally villages occupied by members of the *emishi* or *ezo* 蝦夷 ethnic group, who were relocated to various regions after their conflicts with the court in the early Heian period (Kikuchi 1966; Shibata 2007). Further research on these sites in relation to *bessho* established by medieval Buddhist recluses is required to assess this interpretation.

the mountain as early as 1072.[2] Subsequent decades saw the Kōyasan *bessho* develop into large populations of up to a thousand recluses following visits and donations by cloistered sovereigns (*Fusō ryakki*, KT 6: 840; *Heian ibun* 5, no. 2032). *Bessho* such as those on Kōya were also open to the influx of recluses from other schools. The biography of the ascetic Kyōkai 教懐 (1001–1093) in *Kōyasan ōjōden* (ZJZ 17: 170) discusses his time at the Odawara *bessho* 小田原別所, located between Kyoto and Nara and populated by reclusive monks who had left Kōfukuji 興福寺.[3] After spending much of his life at the Odawara *bessho*, Kyōkai spent his final years on the *bessho* on Mount Kōya, where he was known as the Odawara *hijiri* 小田原聖.

The above gives a sense of the diverse ties that existed between *bessho* and the medieval Buddhist establishment. *Bessho* were founded by reclusive monks with connections to all the major institutions and schools associated with medieval Japanese Buddhism. But despite their connections to powerful medieval temples—and those temples' effective methods for establishing and managing subordinate institutions—the development of *bessho* often involved a variety of contradictory features. Many of the above *bessho* were, of course, tax exempt in their connections to monasteries. Numerous were overseen by patron temples and larger monasteries, but others were managed by private landowners, or even the internal occupants of the *bessho* themselves, completely independent of an outside patron temple or estate manager (TAKAGI 1973, 352). For many *bessho*, this meant that the transmission of overseership was done through on-site monastic lineages. Because of the possibilities afforded by these different managerial stakeholders, the economic status of the lands where *bessho* were established also varied considerably in terms of their location and status. Some, like those associated with Mount Kōya and Shitennōji, were on or very close to the main temple precincts. Others, especially those overseen by Enryakuji, sprang up on temple-owned territory in the provinces. The nature of their "separation" was relative.

The diverse sectarian and administrative possibilities at *bessho* made for equally diverse religious cultures. It is undeniable that *bessho* were bastions for Pure Land practitioners, especially *nenbutsu*-reciting recluses (*nenbutsu hijiri* 念仏聖). Some scholars have referred to many of these sites as *nenbutsu bessho* (TANAKA 2008, 3; NISHIGUCHI 1959, 44). The consistent discovery of sutra deposits (*kyōzuka* 経塚) at many *bessho*, which contained buried copies of the

2. Tucked away in the treasury of Hōjuin 宝寿院 on Mount Kōya is a copy of the *Fudōson shisha himitsu hō* 不動尊使者秘密法, one of the texts that Kūkai 空海 (774–835) imported from China (T 2161, 55.16). The manuscript is attributed to Keishun 慶舜 (d.u.), who lived at Mount Kōya's southern *bessho* in 1072 (FUJII 2000, 29).

3. The Odawara *bessho* has received significant attention among other *bessho*, in part due to the number of accounts concerning its residents (TYLER 1990, 172; GORAI 1975, 98–105).

Lotus Sūtra (*nyohōkyō* 如法経),[4] moreover points to the importance of *Lotus Sūtra* practices at many sites. As places for religious reclusion, *bessho* were also places where reclusive monks could engage in broad forms of learning. The doctrinal studies of provincial monastic scholiasts at the Miwa *bessho* 三輪別所 in the thirteenth century were, for example, marked by associations with passing *shugen* 修験 practitioners, Kegon scholars, and monks from Saidaiji 西大寺 (Andreeva 2017, 114–129).

Despite these differences, there were common elements across many *bessho* that point to their status as a distinct phenomenon in medieval Japanese history. We could cite their historical duration and tax-exempt status, but perhaps the most compelling was their distinct openness to different religious practices and practitioners. While it could be argued that most *bessho* had some associations with Pure Land Buddhism, this was part of a larger fabric of practices that transcended Buddhist schools, from the burial of sutras to esoteric Buddhist scholasticism. Similarly, many *bessho*, such as those on Mount Kōya, Miwa, and Odawara were open to membership of reclusive monks from different temples and school affiliations. Recluses networked and studied across multiple sites and crossed borders between seemingly disparate schools and institutions. *Bessho* were a key component in this mobility.

In addition to their shared openness to like-minded recluses from other places and schools, Chōgen's *bessho* exemplify how open these sites were, more generally, to participation by laypeople in nearby settlements. Chōgen's *bessho* fulfilled a variety of roles, serving as sources for the raw materials for reconstruction, especially lumber and kilns for firing roof tiles; temporary storage facilities for processed materials en route to Tōdaiji, not to mention stopovers for the *hijiri* that assisted Chōgen with his fundraising; and as branch offices for overseeing the operations and local personnel at the estates (Goodwin 1994, 93). In addition to serving as administrative branches, the seven *bessho* were conceived as devotional centers, perhaps inspired by Chōgen's time at the *bessho* on Mount Kōya, in their emphasis on communal Pure Land practice. Each was outfitted with a spacious Pure Land Hall containing life-sized images of Amida and *gorintō* 五輪塔 reliquaries (Ingram 2019). These halls were established as places where provincial residents and estate workers could attend rituals ministered by the resident monks and itinerants who periodically stayed at the *bessho*. In other contexts, locals who lived near *bessho* could engage in sutra burial and related communal practices, forging karmic connections (*kechien* 結縁) with these sites and their resident recluses alike (Takagi 1973, 368).

These brief examples across time and space illustrate an interesting puzzle for scholars: the many *bessho* that sprang up throughout Japan by the twelfth century

4. By the twelfth century, the term *nyohōkyō* referred to sutra burial (Yanagisawa 1972, 146).

were characterized by diversity, both across sites and within them. This diversity is promising in suggesting new avenues for interpreting the place of reclusion and *bessho* in medieval society, but it has also made it difficult to approach them from any singular interpretive angle.

Wilderness and Arāya

In a postscript to a series of poems about Sumiyoshi 住吉, Tendai abbot Jien 慈円 (1155–1225) once reflected on his time at a place that his older brother and regent Kujō no Kanezane 九条兼実 (1149–1207) called the Nishiyama *bessho* 西山別所 (*Gyokuyō*: 551), in Kyoto's southwestern outskirts:

> In the ninth month of a brisk autumn, in the third year of Kenkyū 建久 (1192), I was occupying a desolate (*kūgen* 空閑) mountain temple. While in its pure chapel I conducted both walking and seated *samādhi*s, and studied the dharma. I wrote out the sutra of the single teaching [*Lotus Sūtra*], copied it according to the dharma, and then, during a pilgrimage to the far-off Shitennōji, buried the sutra within its sacred earth. I stayed there for two days, making dozens of offerings and chanting the *nenbutsu* in the afternoon and evening. One early morning, when the dew had barely lifted from the gardens, I visited the ruins of Jōgū Taishi 上宮太子 (Prince Shōtoku) and immersed myself in the hospitality of the locals. (SKT 3: 70)[5]

This brief account reveals the legacy of the recluses who populated and visited this markedly "desolate" *bessho* earlier in the century. *Goshūi ōjōden* provides two accounts of the ascetic Eisen 永暹 (b. 1034) who was a resident monk (*jūsō* 住僧) of the *bessho* on Mount Gakuen 鰐淵 in Izumo 出雲 Province (ZJZ 17: 114, 118).[6] Like Jien, Eisen was a fervent pilgrim to Shitennōji and Yoshiminedera 善峯寺, where he would devote his time to copying out and burying copies of the *Lotus Sūtra*. These trips were so frequent that people called him the *nyohōkyō hijiri* 如法経聖 ("sutra-burying hermit") (ZJZ 17: 118). The account of Gison 義尊 (d.u.), a hermit taking a vow of silence who actually lived at the Nishiyama *bessho*, mirrors the stark opening of Jien's account in describing the area as a "desolate wilderness" or "wasteland" (*kōya* 曠野) "overgrown with thorny vines and shrubs" (*keikyoku* 荊棘) (ZJZ 17: 114).

5. An epilogue for a poem written on a separate occasion in the same collection recounts this period of poetry composition and preparation for sutra burial at a hospice chapel (*ōjōin* 往生院, later known as Sankoji 三鈷寺) located on the estate of Yoshiminedera 良峰寺 on Nishiyama (SKT 3, 131: 251). Both institutions were initially founded as hermitages by the monk Gensan 源算 (d. 1099) in 1029 (or 1040) and 1074, respectively, with the administration for the latter being handed over to Kanshō 観性 (d. 1190), and then to Jien (BLUM 2002, 260).

6. An *imayō* 今様 song from *Ryōjin hishō* tells of this site, rendered as Wanibuchi 鰐淵 ("crocodile abyss"), as an active center for *hijiri* and *yamabushi* 山伏, alongside Minō 箕面 and Nachi 那智 (SNKBZ 42: 264).

If there was a single feature shared by all *bessho*, it was their representation as being in the wilderness, which is to say, on wild, vacant, desolate, undeveloped, and even unproductive land. These representations foregrounded *bessho* as places that were fundamentally *distant* from the elite monasteries, monastic estates, and temples in the capital from which their reclusive residents had separated themselves. But this distance was not defined by the quantitative separation between *bessho* and their *honjo*. The varying quantitative gaps between *bessho* and their centers varied considerably, ranging from those on Mount Kōya's mountainsides to Enryakuji's *bessho* on the volcanic shores of southern Kyushu. The distance implied by the term *bessho* was relative and, more importantly, rhetorical. While previous work has focused on *bessho* in terms of institutional and sectarian history, this section surveys descriptions of these sites in eleventh- and twelfth-century primary sources to introduce an alternative approach to *bessho* as a discourse about places as wild and distant.

Taken at face value, wildernesses and wastelands seem to have been the main criteria in determining where to establish *bessho*. In 1114, the monk Jinyū 尋有 (d.u.) submitted a petition (*mōshibumi* 申文) concerning the location of the Kawakami *bessho* 河上別所 on an estate of Kawakami 河上 Shrine in Hizen 肥前 Province. The estate had become overgrown, and was now vacant and without an administrator. The document summarizes the founding of the *bessho* on the estate in 1091 by a monk named Enjin 円尋 (d.u.). The estate is described as a "desolate wasteland" (*kūgen kōya no chi* 空閑荒野地), the *bessho* being established for the purpose of occupying this empty spot of land and ministering to the mountain-dwelling locals (*yama no shū* 山衆) (*Heian ibun* 4, no. 1299).

Such descriptions also appear in the founding episodes of more prominent *bessho*. A promissory oath (*kishōmon* 起請文) recounts Chōgen's founding of a *bessho* in Suō 周防 Province in 1187:

> When Chōgen first established the temple hall, monastic residence, and crop field of the Namuamidabutsu *bessho* 南無阿弥陀仏別所 at the foot of Mount Hanamiya 花宮, he personally sheared and cut through the thorns and briars of this wilderness (*kōya no keikyoku* 曠野荊棘). Grasping a trowel, he worked away for three days and three nights. He was assisted by the powers of the Eight Great Kannon 八大観音,[7] the thirty protective deities (*sanjū banshin* 三十番神), and the manifestations (*zuirui* 随類) of various other spirits. This plot of land was unclaimed by the throne and had no utility for the realm. It was solely through Shunjō's 俊乗 (Chōgen's) efforts that his oath was fulfilled by opening

7. A set of eight Kannon appearing in medieval ritual texts such as the Mudōji 無動寺 monk Jōnen's 静然 (d.u.) 1154 *Gyōrinshō* 行林抄 (T 2409, 79.217–19) and Jōkei's 貞慶 (1155–1213) 1209 *Kannon kōshiki* 観音講式 (T 2728, 84.886b). Nakamura Hajime (1975, 1104b) maintains that the source of this arrangement is *Nyoirin daranikyō* 如意輪陀羅尼経, translated by Bodhiruci 菩提流志 (eighth century).

> this wilderness (*kōya* 曠野). The local governor decreed an exemption of corvée labor and miscellaneous estate services (*manzō kuji* 万雑公事) to ensure that future resident monks (*jūryo* 住侶) would have the provisions necessary for their livelihood. (*Kamakura ibun* 1, no. 292)

This source uses some of the exact same terms that we saw above—here with no small amount of dramatic flair—describing the Suō *bessho* as a thorny wilderness in need of a hermit's diligence and trusty trowel. Even Chōgen's *bessho*, despite their centrality to the revival of one of Nara's great religious institutions, were established in wastelands.

The terms *kōya*, *kūgen*, and *keikyoku* were commonly used to describe *bessho*, but they were part of a wider field of terminology. A deed of transfer (*yuzurijō* 譲状) from 1156 concerns the Mitaki *bessho* 三瀧別所 in Kii 紀伊 Province, affiliated with Ganseiji 願成寺 and founded by Tankei 湛慶 (d.u.) in 1145. The document describes the *bessho* as "lying within a remote mountain village, deep in the wilderness" (*shigeno no sato no okuyama no naka* 重野郷奥山中) on a broad moor (*taiya* 大野) with "abandoned field irrigation sluices" (*kotaguchi* 古田口), on account of having no proprietor (*Heian ibun* 6, no. 2809). Like the above account of Chōgen, these descriptions border on hyperbole to reinforce the desolation of this *bessho*.

The recurrence of this language in descriptions of where *bessho* were located speaks to their importance for understanding the meaning of *bessho* as a historical category. For Takagi (1973, 373), these recurring terms meant that *bessho* were, perhaps above all other features, synonymous with vacant land in rural settings. He sees it as key to defining them. In his entry for *bessho* for the *Kokushi daijiten*, Takagi (1979–1997) defines *bessho* as "a type of religious institution (*shūkyō shisetsu* 宗教施設) that was established either on vacant (*kūgen*) land within temple precincts, without a proprietor (*ryōshu* 領主), or on undeveloped (*mikaihatsu* 未開発) land." Rather than being necessarily barren, this would have most often been land that was not formally connected, at the time of its discovery or mention in the historical record, to a temple or private estate, and thus land that was uncultivated. As Takagi understands it, uncultivated land was likely attractive for those planning to establish a *bessho*. This was because uncultivated land would, like the similar estate category of *beppu* 別府, have been temporarily tax and labor free for a set amount of time following its acquisition as part of a larger estate. This would have surely allowed *bessho* residents easier access to resources in the remote areas where they were situated (Takagi 1973, 352–353).

Although directly interpreting the relationship between *bessho* and vacant land might suggest that all *bessho* were places unto themselves and administratively distant from centers of power and material production, we should be careful to not read this too literally. It is important to bear in mind the rhetorical

elements of these claims. Many of the above sources that frame *bessho* in this way are *ōjōden*, short biographies illustrating the lives and stringent devotional practices of illustrious monks, nuns, and laymen as they endeavored to achieve birth in the Pure Land of Amida (*gokuraku ōjō* 極楽往生). A recurring narrative trope in tales about *bessho* is the withdrawal of the protagonist into the wilderness after leaving their home temple (*rizan* 離山; *riji* 離寺). In some cases, as in the example of the monk Jūi 重怡 (d. 1140) and his rediscovery of the Amida Hall on Mount Kurama 鞍馬, a newly minted recluse would come upon a dilapidated chapel from generations past, using the site as the basis for their preparations to enter the Pure Land (ZJZ 17: 160). In other cases, such as Ryōnin's move to Ōhara, where he built a small hut (*shōan* 小庵) and later the Raigōin 来迎院, hermits would slip away to construct thatched huts in existing *bessho* (ZJZ 17: 144–145).

Sources such as *engi* 縁起 (narratives about the origins of religious institutions) also describe hermits' discoveries of completely new plots of land for establishing hermitages. The *Daihizanji engi*, completed by Shinzei 信西 (1106–1160) in 1156, tells of the construction of Daihizanji 大悲山寺 (Bujōji 峰定寺), located in Hanase *bessho* 花背別所 just north of Kyoto (TANAKA 2006). The first portion of the narrative follows the discovery of a suitable mountain:

> A practitioner (*gyōnin* 行人)[8] once wished to live somewhere scenic. He constantly, and single-mindedly, journeyed to magnificent mountains and peaks to fulfill his vow to attain the supreme way. He eventually came upon a miraculous place in the northern reaches of the capital, just northwest of Kurama. It was a marvelous mountain encircled by interlocking peaks. Once he arrived, he became so enamored with this place that he couldn't bear to leave. He immediately thatched a roof with silvergrass and thorns (*bōji* 茅茨) and took the mountain [Daihizan] as his abode. (DNBZ 120: 93)

The practitioner is revealed at the end of this narrative as the *hijiri* Sainen 西念 (d.u.), not to be confused with the Sainen associated with Shitennōji. The Sainen from this *engi*—who is said to have personally drafted it—seems to have been a former resident of the Mitaki *bessho* and was known to periodically travel from his hermitage on Mount Daihi 大悲 to the capital, where he would perform ordinations and last rites for members of the royal family (ST 16: 108–109). True to form, Sainen inaugurated his own hermitage through the construction of a lone thatched hut, hewn together with grasses, vines, and thorny branches from the wilds nearby.

Alongside these narrative tropes, the terminology used to describe *bessho* has clear Buddhist scriptural meanings that push back against their interpre-

8. This term may have operated similarly to the word *hijiri*, as it was used to refer to personnel that occupied the *bessho* on Mount Kōya (DRUMMOND 2010, 819). I leave it translated in a more neutral sense.

tation as terms used solely to identify land status. Nakamura Hajime (1975, 281b) has noted that the terms *kōya* and *kūgen* appear all over Mahāyāna literature. They appear in the *Lotus Sūtra* as well as the *Abhidharma Storehouse Treatise* as translations of the Sanskrit term for a distant hermitage: *araṇya*. As a namesake for the *araṇyavāsin*—hermits, ascetics, and thaumaturges who forsook the cells and community of the monastery in favor of a life of eremeticism and exposure in the open air of the forest—the *araṇya* appear in many of the earliest Mahāyāna scriptures as abodes where such figures could fully distance themselves from worldly desires in pursuit of the path to enlightenment (T 721, 17.186; T 262, 9.3, 9.32; T 220, 7.286; T 1509, 25.218). Terms for *araṇya* like *kūgen*—vacant or deserted land—were meaningful in this regard in teasing out the Buddhist meanings of such abodes. As distant places empty of secular or monastic duties, they were ideal for emptying oneself. Although the term *araṇya* came to, conversely, mean "temple" in Buddhist Sanskrit, the various translations in East Asian Buddhist writings that we see used in descriptions of *bessho* suggest a persistent association with "forests," "secluded places," and "desolate wildernesses." Nakamura (1975, 281b) holds that *araṇya* and its translations as *kōya* and *kūgen* were adopted in East Asian Buddhist texts to refer to patches of wilderness that were separate from population centers that were therefore ideal for reclusion. In Japan this usage became standardized to refer to isolated forest retreats occupied by *hijiri* and *nenbutsu* practitioners, who established small settlements of makeshift huts and worship halls. It is likely that the term *kōya* 曠野 (or *arano*), which can also be read as *araya*, was at one point a transliteration of the Sanskrit *araṇya*.

The transliteration *arannya* 阿蘭若 (normally abbreviated as *rannya* 蘭若) was sometimes used interchangeably with the word *bessho*. The *Sange ōjōki* contains the biography of the monk Kyōgen 經源 (d. 1113–1118) from Kōfukuji who went into hermitage at the Odawara *bessho*. An interlinear notation refers to this site as the Odawara *rannya* 小田原蘭若, "the Odawara *araṇya*" (ZJZ 17: 142). As we know from the previous reference to Kyōkai, as well as a colophon for an 1132 manuscript now kept in the Kōzanji 高山寺 treasury that was originally copied at the site, this area was contemporaneously known as the Odawara *bessho* (Matsumoto 2008, 15; ZJZ 17: 170). *Shūi ōjōden* likewise refers to Jakugen's 寂源 (Minamoto no Tokinobu 源時叙; d. 1024) residence in what Jien later called the Ōhara *bessho* 大原別所 (*Shūgyokushū*, poem 701, 30)—the Shōrinin—as an *araṇya*, a timeworn hermitage (*korannya* 古蘭若) (ZJZ 17: 63).

In medieval Japan, Buddhist monasteries were called *garan* 伽藍, an abbreviation of *sōgyaranma* 僧伽藍摩, itself a transliteration of the Sanskrit *saṃghārāma* ("a garden for monks"). Rather than manicured gardens, *bessho* typified the scriptural image of the *araṇya*: remote forest hermitages in forgotten wildernesses, hidden amid tangly overgrowth. The ancient Indian tension between

monastery, or *vihāra*, and *araṇya* played out discursively in the ways that medieval Japanese *bessho* were described. Such descriptions of *bessho* articulated their status as places of separation—*distance*—from monasteries and other conventional sites for social and religious practice. Although *bessho* were often located in distant areas, these descriptions should be taken as more rhetorical than literal. *Bessho* were a discourse about places that were distant, and therefore ideal for Buddhist practice and attainment. Understanding the discursive distance of *bessho* helps to explain their diversity. In their separation from regimented monasteries, *bessho* were places where one could practice freely and with openness to the integration of otherwise different things and people.

Affordances of Distance

Understanding descriptions of *bessho* as distant places is essential for making sense of their diversity, as well as understanding their importance in the history of medieval Japanese Buddhism. Their status as places of distance—be it spatial or rhetorical—allowed *bessho* and their residents an openness to new ideas, practitioners, and even ways of practicing Buddhism. By way of discussion, I would like to reflect on some of the affordances, or "potentialities" (Knappett 2004, 44), of this distance and what it means for understanding the unique characteristics of *bessho* in medieval Japan. The diversity of *bessho* that transpired because of their distance from regimented monasteries was characterized by the meeting of otherwise disparate forms of social practice. *Bessho* were places for social interaction as much as they were for reclusion, or social isolation. The interplay between the socially isolated and interactive functions of *bessho* is crucial for understanding the significance of *bessho* in medieval Buddhist history.[9]

For the reclusive monks who established and moved to *bessho*, there were major affordances to living in the distant wilderness away from their home temples. Reclusion in the distant wilderness meant that *bessho* occupants could engage in a wider variety of activities that they normally could not do at official monasteries. Relative to major temple institutions and their concerns for leveraging their positions in relation to outside institutions for the purpose of accruing land, influence, and court sponsorship, *bessho* could be open to unmediated interaction with those who would otherwise be considered outsiders. My earlier

9. The title of this article is a reference to Michel Foucault's 1967 lecture "Des Espace Autres," ("Of other spaces"). Foucault discussed heterotopias: sites at once different from conventional spaces but also marked by their totality, in which all other spaces are "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1984, 3). Heterotopias are, in other words, places both separated from and connected to society. Although developed in a context far removed from medieval Japan, Foucault's concept is useful for communicating the coexistence and integration of seemingly distinct forms of social practice at *bessho*.

examples include mixed religious practices, interschool networking between mobile reclusive monks of different backgrounds, diverse study regimes, and varied land management practices that were often quite outside of the interests of major monasteries. Focusing on the sectarian or institutional features of *bessho* does little to help us make sense of this kind of openness. Situating this diversity in the context of discursive features of *bessho* as wildernesses and places of distance provides a nuanced interpretation of their trans-institutional and trans-sectarian atmospheres. For reclusive monks of a variety of institutional persuasions, their distance was productive of a climate of openness and inclusion ideal for reclusion and Buddhist attainment.

Examples of *bessho* as places that, in their distance, could incorporate the exchange and intertwining of individuals of different institutions and schools shows that *bessho* were as much social places as they were for reclusion away from their world. This helps to explain the consistent role of lay Buddhists, particularly commoners, across these sites. Although most *bessho* residents were reclusive monks, they were not living in complete isolation from laypeople. Most *bessho* were located near provincial villages or mountain hamlets. Previous scholarship has suggested that many *bessho* were hubs for bringing together ordinary people into the fabric of the larger temples that oversaw them (Hisano 1999). Examples of the interactions between reclusive monks and locals living nearby suggest that social interaction with those living on the margins of the cognitive and social map was as much of an affordance of distance as social isolation. As we saw earlier, the Kawakami *bessho* was established to minister to locals dwelling in the mountains nearby. Chōgen's *bessho* were similarly established with the provincial residents of Tōdaiji's estates in mind. The *Daihizanji engi* moreover ends with Sainen's deceased father visiting him in a dream to comment on the villages (*shūraku* 聚落) near his hermitage (*sanrin* 山林, yet another translation of *araṇya*) (DNBZ 120: 94). Early twentieth-century excavations of the nearby Hanase *bessho* sutra deposits uncovered contemporaneous sutra tubes, containing fragments of *Lotus Sūtra* chapters and bronze icons of the deity Bishamonten 毘沙門天, inscribed with the names of local families and even the nameless, including an inscription for a woman from a family that made their home in the mountains (*yama uji no onna* 山氏女) (Naniwada 1985, 38). Inscriptions from unearthed bronzes and accounts of sutra burial campaigns that we saw in the examples of Jien and others point to sutra burial as a common practice at *bessho*. At places like Hanase, sutra burial may have even served as the means through which *bessho*-dwelling recluses could engage with surrounding communities, mobilizing resources to finance rough-hewn icons, sutra manuscripts, and bronze tubes bearing the names of local leaders and the hermits who oversaw the process.

The relationship between village locals and *bessho* residents suggests that while *bessho* were distant from major monastic centers, they fostered close interactions with local communities. In Sanskrit, *araṇya* not only referred to distant and foreign lands, but more broadly to spaces outside of settlements and agricultural space (Singh 2008, 279). Of course, the forest and wilderness were important characteristics of *araṇya*. The *Daihizanji engi* even suggests that places of reclusion described as *araṇya* in medieval Japan could be synonymous with the forest. This distinction was not so simple, however. While associated with the wilds, *bessho* were, as we have seen, established in proximity to provincial towns and hamlets. They were, therefore, strongly linked to images of rusticity and agriculture, with the poet-recluse Jakuzen 寂然 (fl. twelfth century) describing his "mountain village" or "home" (*yamazato* 山里) in the "village of Ōhara" (Ōhara no sato 大原の里), in his set of ten poems to Saigyō 西行 (1118–1190), who had gone into hermitage on Mount Kōya (SKT 3, 125: 69). We get the sense that these places straddled the nature-culture divide, transcending divisions between wilderness and hamlet, and nature and culture.

Precisely because of their distance from institutional centers, *bessho* worked as places that integrated disparate categories, allowing them to coexist, collide, and converge. Beyond the dichotomies of the wilderness and the hamlet, *bessho* also idealized the seemingly contradictory polarities of social isolation—that is, reclusion—and social interaction, being intentionally positioned in relation to settlements. As distant places of encounter between seeming contradictions, *bessho* were able to integrate both the social and the reclusive.

Otherwise disparate categories—people, practices, and even ideas—came together at *bessho* and made them places of production and innovation. *Bessho* were places of exchange between reclusive monks from a variety of different backgrounds as well as what they brought with them. This climate of exchange positioned *bessho* and their residents as leading certain innovations in medieval culture. In addition to the role of *bessho* residents as shown in written works that would form the nucleus of medieval recluse literature, recent research has also started to acknowledge the importance of *bessho* residents, and their external networks with the court, in the development of new forms of *waka* 和歌 poetry in the Insei period (Chikamoto 2016).

The integration of reclusion and social interaction put *bessho* at the forefront of many developments in Buddhist thought and practice. The Kurodani *bessho* 黒谷別所 on Mount Hiei was a major inspiration for Hōnen's formalized Pure Land Buddhist movement and its appeal to the wider populace. The activities of other figures associated with schools and movements, both within and outside the purview of "Pure Land Buddhism," that burgeoned during the Kamakura period also fell within the rubrics of reclusive monks and *bessho*-oriented trends. The *hijiri* Ippen 一遍 (1234–1289) and the Jishū movement come to mind as they

interacted with, and even fed, impoverished communities in mountains, lowlands, and urban enclaves, later represented in thirteenth-century handscrolls such as the *Ippen hijiri e* 一遍聖絵. Practices of feeding beggars, lepers, and subaltern groups was also associated with the ritual pacification of hungry ghosts (*gaki* 餓鬼), as seen in the earlier tweflth-century *Gaki zōshi* 餓鬼草紙 (Yamamoto 2009). Recent excavations of wooden pagodas emblazoned with images of Amida, like those represented in *Gaki zōshi*, near *bessho* in Nagano and northern Kyoto, point to their status as hubs for similar rites and the development of adjacent charitable activities orchestrated by *bessho hijiri* (Miyazaki 2014; Zaidanhōjin 2006). Other examples include not only charitable activities, but even the development of worship spaces for marginal social groups that were often undocumented in government registers (such as *hinin* 非人) in the vicinity of temples such as Saidaiji as famously orchestrated by Eison 叡尊 (1201–1290) and his Shingon Ritsu school (Groner 2001, 140).

Such developments were intimately linked to the proximity of marginal social groups to *bessho*, and the ability of the famously black-robed reclusive monks to circumvent impurity taboos relating to death and social marginality (Matsuo 1998, 243; Uejima 2010, 504). Recent research has suggested how this further contributed to the popularization of Buddhist funerals in later periods, with *bessho* initially serving as ideal places for conducting last rites (Stone 2016, 145). Understanding *bessho* as places of diversity and distance where monks could productively engage in both reclusive isolation and social interaction suggests their critical importance in helping Buddhism transcend the limited boundaries of the court, aristocrats, and great temples, to interact with and gain popularity among the masses.

Conclusion

In their diversity and distribution from the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, *bessho* held a near-ubiquitous and dynamically important place in the history of medieval Japanese religion. To illuminate the role of their reclusive residents in developing many of the key features that we associate with medieval Japanese Buddhism, it is important to provide a working framework for understanding *bessho*. This article explains the features and significance of *bessho* as a diverse, albeit discrete historical phenomenon. Previous research has focused on the institutional and sectarian features of *bessho*, making it impossible to explain their inherent diversity. I have attempted to make sense of this diversity by examining the discursive strategies surrounding *bessho* as places associated with the remote wildernesses of the Japanese provinces and the Buddhist past. Descriptions of *bessho* as wildernesses foregrounded them as distant from the geographic and ideological centers of medieval Japan, evoking the real and

imagined distance between writers and readers in the Heian capital and the lands, people, and means to salvation occupying their peripheries. The distance of *bessho* afforded reclusive monks wide-ranging opportunities. *Bessho* were places of alterity, characterized as much by distance and remoteness as they were by the experience of difference, distinctiveness, and the creative freedoms implied therein. Affording both isolation and interaction, the distance of *bessho* gave residents agency and the opportunity to incorporate and navigate these otherwise disparate social and ritual contexts free from the orthodoxies and privatizing tendencies of major urban monastic centers. Focusing on the discursive features of *bessho* reveals how these sites accommodated and even attracted diversity—and their characteristic integration of social isolation and interaction—to help us understand the importance of these places in the creation of medieval Japanese Buddhism as we know it.

Amid their productive integration of reclusive isolation and social interaction, *bessho* and their diverse personnel occupied the vanguard of innovations in medieval Japanese Buddhism, initiating the movement of teachings and practices to communities far beyond the confines of the ideological center and setting the stage for many of the later developments that we associate with Kamakura Buddhism. The socially varied and trans-sectarian qualities of *bessho* made them ideal for, and even productive of, the diverse religious interests and mobility of reclusive monks who were so instrumental in these developments. Recent work has made it clear that Buddhism began to spread to the Japanese provinces before the Kamakura period (Lowe 2020, 274). *Bessho* illuminate how Buddhism completed its movement beyond the boundaries of the court, aristocrats, and great temples to spread among the masses. The interactive atmosphere of these sites also helps us to better understand the integration of Buddhism into medieval social life, notably in relation to new developments in Buddhist practice. Future research might look to examine the role of *bessho* as hotbeds for innovative ritual and doctrinal developments beyond Pure Land Buddhism and the more ostensibly populist oriented developments, for example, in relation to Zen, Shugendo, or other movements later in the medieval period. In their resistance to clean categorization into specific schools and institutional rubrics, the *bessho* I have delineated in this article transcend both the sectarian approach to these changes that distinguishes New Buddhism from Old Buddhism, as well as dichotomies between establishment and heterodox practices that have been central to institutional approaches. These distant places of reclusion played a significant role in the development of medieval Japanese Buddhism and its qualities as a trans-sectarian field that suited the interests and ideals of society beyond the state.

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ABBREVIATIONS

DNBZ *Dai Nihon Bukkyō zensho* 大日本仏教全書. 161 vols. Bussho Kankōkai, 1912–1922.

GR *Gunsho ruijū* 群書類従. 133 volumes. Yagi Shoten, 1983–2002.

JZ *Jōdoshū zensho* 浄土宗全書. 20 vols. Sankibō Busshorin, 1975.

KT *Kokushi taikei* 国史大系. 17 vols. Keizai Zashisha, 1897–1901.

NST *Nihon shisō taikei* 日本思想大系. 67 vols. Iwanami Shoten, 1970–1982.

SKT *Shinpen kokka taikan* 新編国歌大観. 10 vols. Kadokawa Shoten, 1983–1992.

SNKBT *Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikei* 新日本古典文学大系. 100 vols. Iwanami Shoten, 1989–2005.

SNKBZ *Shinpen Nihon koten bungaku zenshū* 新編日本古典文学全集. 88 vols. Shōgakukan, 1994–2002.

ST *Shiryō taisei* 史料大成. 33 vols. Sasagawa Taneo 笹川種郎 and Yano Tarō 矢野太郎, eds. Naigai Shoseki, 1934–1944.

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ZGR *Zoku gunsho ruijū* 續群書類從. 33 vols. Yagi Shoten, 1975–2000.

ZJZ *Zoku Jōdoshū zensho* 続浄土宗全書. 19 vols. Sankibō Busshorin, 1972–1974.

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