



Stephen G. Covell, *The Teaching and Teachings of Temple Buddhism in Contemporary Japan*

University of Hawai'i Press, 2024. 188 pages. Hardcover \$75.00, ISBN-13 9780824897574; paperback \$30.00, ISBN-13 9780824898878.

STEPHEN COVELL's 2005 monograph, *Japanese Temple Buddhism: Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation*, transformed the study of Buddhism in modern Japan. Among other things, it gave us "Temple Buddhism," a useful term for "Buddhism as lived by the members of those sects of Japanese Buddhism that were founded before the 1600s" (COVELL 2005, 4). Before this work was published, contemporary forms of Japanese Buddhism had been largely neglected by scholars who assumed it to be a degenerate, hollowed-out form of Buddhism as it must have existed in Japan's more religiously vibrant medieval past. Covell's quantitative and qualitative research illuminated the current concerns, struggles, and strategies of Buddhist practitioners in contemporary Japan, particularly those in the Tendai school with whom Covell spent the most time.

This landmark contribution opened up new territory for scholarly investigation, laying the ground for a burgeoning field of scholarship on various facets of Temple Buddhism. To name just a few monographs that took up Covell's call to take Temple Buddhism seriously: Jørn BORUP (2008) delved into the lived tradition of Myōshinji in the Rinzai Zen sect; Mark ROWE (2011) examined changing death practices and work by temple priests to maintain the "bonds" of the dead; John NELSON (2013) explored the experimentation of temple priests in response to societal and economic changes; NIWA Nobuko (2019) highlighted the performance of gender by female resident priests in Nichiren temples; and my own ethnographic study of temple families focused on the domestic mode of doing Buddhism in contemporary Jōdo Shinshū temples (STARLING 2019). Still more recent work by scholars such as Monika SCHRIMPF (2021), Paulina KOLATA and Gwendolyn GILLSON (2021), and Hannah GOULD (2023) has shed further light on material culture, food, gender, and emotion in shaping Buddhist institutions and practices in contemporary Japan.

Covell's newest monograph, *The Teaching and Teachings of Temple Buddhism in Contemporary Japan*, contributes to this now well-established field an

enlightening picture of the doctrinal content and institutional contexts in which Buddhism is taught in Japan today. Framing his study as being about “teachings” rather than “doctrine” allows Covell to zoom in on less obvious sites for the doing and transmitting of Buddhist ideas, habits, values, and the like. Covell argues that “the center [of Buddhist teaching] is much more diffuse” (4) than we would think if we were to limit ourselves to studying materials produced by head temples and doctrinal training centers of Buddhist sects. Combating the scholarly bias for the past that many of us working on the contemporary period are quite familiar with, Covell takes up the contemporary activities of Buddhist universities, preschools, and charismatic monks, as well as Buddhist perspectives on moral education in Japan.

After an introduction in which Covell makes a plea for scholars to rethink our “valuation of the old over the new” (3), the second chapter explores the state of Buddhist-affiliated kindergartens (*yōchien*) and daycares (*hoikuen*). Here, Covell highlights the interactions of Buddhist institutions with secular standards of teacher training and educational content. These early-childhood schools are generally not seen as an opportunity to spread the teachings in the sense of converting people or winning adherents to Buddhism, and indeed the learning goals at both Buddhist and secular preschools consist of broadly amenable values such as empathy, kindness, health, and perseverance (23). At Buddhist schools, Covell argues, such values “tend to be couched in terms of a Buddhist worldview” (31). Further study of this topic might incorporate more information about the educators and families who send their children to such preschools, to better understand whether the Buddhist flavor of such moral education is discernible—perhaps even appealing—even to those who do not identify as Buddhist.

The third chapter turns to Buddhist institutions of higher education in Japan, of which there are currently sixty-five registered with the Council of Buddhist Universities (33). Primarily engaged in delivering undergraduate education and conducting research, increasingly such institutions are also seen as occasions to “make manifest a vision of Temple Buddhism as an engine of public service” (63). The fourth chapter, titled “Moral Education and Buddhism,” profiles public debates about moral education after the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education was removed from Japan’s schools after its defeat in World War II. Covell provides many examples of hand-wringing by politicians, educators, and Buddhist leaders over the apparent impoverishment of Japanese hearts/minds (*kokoro*) in postwar Japan. In this discourse, Buddhism—and religion in general—is often positioned as an antidote to the perceived materialism of Japanese values. The final chapter, “Learning to Persevere: The Popular Teaching of Tendai Ascetics,” is an adaptation of an article of the same name published in the *JJRS* in 2004. Here, Covell describes the teachings of several Tendai monks who have attained

a degree of charismatic authority through their completion of the *kaihōgyō*, an intensive thousand-day ascetic ritual on Mt. Hiei.

In all, the book paints a broad and complex picture of the Buddhist teachings and their place in contemporary Japanese society, primarily within various types of Buddhist-affiliated institutions. It would be wonderful to see this important material put to more analytical use, for instance by engaging with more recently emerging questions about lived expressions of Buddhist doctrine (ROWE 2017; STARLING 2019) and the complicated role of Buddhist personnel in secular institutions like hospitals (BENEDICT 2023) and prisons (LYONS 2021). The main concern expressed by Covell throughout the book is for scholars to take contemporary developments in Japan as a serious form of Buddhism, despite its differences from the past or from other Buddhist cultures. I share this desire, but in my own experience the bias for the past has softened in most scholarly venues, in large part thanks to the massive influence of Covell's first monograph on the field of Japanese Buddhist studies.

Where the book falls short in terms of argumentation it exceeds in much-needed emphasis on practitioners' own priorities and the broader sociological context in which Buddhism exists in Japan today. Covell expresses the wish that scholars seek to "learn more about how Buddhist teachings are created and recreated in contemporary Japan and what that process says about how we as scholars approach Buddhism as a subject of research and teaching" (8). With recent and forthcoming work by a newer crop of scholars following in Covell's footsteps, I would say we are well on our way.

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