

What is Kamakura New Buddhism?

Official Monks and Reclusive Monks

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Recent scholarship has elucidated many aspects of medieval Japanese religion and society, leading to a radical rethinking of the term "Kamakura New Buddhism." Kuroda Toshio's model of an exoteric-esoteric system (kenmitsu taisai) has been particularly influential. Nevertheless some problems remain. This article summarizes a model for understanding Kamakura New Buddhism in terms of the differences between official monks (kansō) and reclusive monks (tonseisō).

"KAMAKURA NEW BUDDHISM" refers to the schools of Mahayana Buddhism that developed in Japan during the Kamakura period (1180–1333), and that dominate Japanese Buddhism today. Although people in contemporary Japan profess a general lack of interest in religion and religious institutions, most Japanese are Buddhists and have a familial affiliation to one of the schools of Kamakura New Buddhism. These schools have also exerted a great influence on Japanese culture and civilization, including Japanese art and language. Many important scholars, including Ienaga Saburō 家永三郎 (1913–), Inoue Mitsusada 井上光貞 (1916–1983), and Kuroda Toshio 黒田俊雄 (1926–1993), have studied and elucidated many aspects of Kamakura New Buddhism. Kuroda Toshio's model of an exoteric-esoteric system (*kenmitsu taisai* 顕密体制) has received much attention recently as a new way of understanding medieval Japanese religion and society, and of interpreting the development of Kamakura New Buddhism.¹ Although I have learned much from their studies, many problems remain. In this short essay I will introduce my own model for understanding Kamakura New Buddhism, based on the difference

¹ See, for example, the special issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (23/3–4) on "The Legacy of Kuroda Toshio," edited by James Dobbins (1996).

between official monks (*kansō* 官僧) and reclusive monks (*tonseisō* 遁世僧), the two principal types of Buddhist monks and nuns in the medieval period. The typical features of official monks are listed below, though it must be admitted that there were monks to whom all of these characteristics did not apply.²

- 1 Official monks were permitted to enter the Buddhist order by permission of the emperor.
- 2 The regular duty of official monks was to pray for the welfare of the emperor and the nation.
- 3 Official monks did not display extreme faith in the founder of their school (*soshi* 祖師).
- 4 Official monks were limited in their ability to work with and save women and the sick (especially lepers), conduct funerals, and raise religious funds, because they were required to keep their distance from impurities.
- 5 In principle, official monks had to participate in an official initiation ceremony (*tokudo* 得度) to become a novice, and an ordination (*jukai* 受戒) to qualify as a monk.
- 6 Official monks typically wore white surplices (*byakue* 僧衣).
- 7 The head of their temples was called a *bettō* 別当, *zasu* 座主, or *chōja* 長者.
- 8 The official monks did not organize orders that included secular believers.
- 9 Official monks can be characterized as participating in religion for the community, rather than for individuals.

The features of the reclusive monks and their orders are as follows, once again with the recognition that many exceptions exist. Although I use the term “monks,” many women were also a part of this movement.

- 1 The founders (*soshi*) of these groups were called “reclusive monks.” The founders or their successors decided whether a person could enter the order. In general, the emperor and his government played no part in determining who entered each order.
- 2 The regular task of reclusive monks was to pray in response to the individual needs of believers, but the monks also sometimes prayed for the welfare of the emperor and the nation.
- 3 The reclusive monks displayed a fervent faith in the founder of their school.

² I have used the term *kansō* (official monk), but there were also many official nuns (*kanni* 官尼); in keeping with Japanese usage I usually include nuns when I refer to “official monks.”

- 4 The reclusive monks performed practices for the salvation for women and lepers, conducted funerals, and engaged in religious fund-raising, all practices that the official monks considered impure.
- 5 The reclusive monks underwent initiation ceremonies and ordinations sponsored by their own orders, not by the government.
- 6 The reclusive monks' typical uniform was a black surplice (*kokue* 黒衣).
- 7 The heads of the reclusive monks' temples were called *chōrō* 長老.
- 8 The reclusive monks belonged to orders that included secular believers.
- 9 The reclusive monks participated in personal religion (religion for the individual rather than for the community).

The Buddhism that the reclusive monk established and spread was, in fact, Kamakura New Buddhism. Its most important feature was that, for the first time in Japanese history, a religion for the individual emerged that firmly established religious orders apart from those approved by the imperial and aristocratic families.

Most of Kamakura New Buddhism's founders began their careers in the world of the official monk, but then rejected their official status and established their own orders. Many documents reveal that they were all called *tonseisō* (reclusive monks). This led me to wonder why the founders (*soshi*) felt a need to escape from the world of the official monk. As a result of exploring their world, I concluded that while official monks enjoyed many privileges, they faced many restrictions as well. Of course, the founders of orders of reclusive monks may have each had their own personal reasons for leaving the world of official monks, but I believe that the underlying reason was the restrictions imposed upon them as official monks.

From the eighth century until the sixteenth century, the Japanese emperor generally monopolized the right to permit Buddhists to enter the priesthood. Official monks, in turn, were like bureaucrats whose regular task was to pray for the welfare of the emperor and the nation. As noted above, the priests had to undergo *tokudo* (officially sanctioned initiations) and *jukai* (ordinations). The term *tokudo* refers to entering the Buddhist priesthood. At the *tokudo* ceremony, the candidates' heads were shaved; they then put on the surplices of a Buddhist priest and swore to observe the ten basic Buddhist precepts. After the *tokudo* ceremony they became *shami* 沙弥 (novices) and were awarded certificates from the government attesting to their new status. The term *jukai* (literally "receiving the precepts") refers to the ceremony

by which they became full-fledged Buddhist priests (*biku* 比丘).

The places where the *jukai* ceremony was held were called *kaidan* 戒壇 (ordination platforms). In the latter half of the eighth century, ordination platforms for official monks were constructed at the three temples of Tōdai-ji 東大寺, Kanzeon-ji 觀世音寺, and Yakushi-ji 藥師寺. At the Tōdai-ji ordination platform, novices swore to observe the 250 Buddhist precepts based on the *Ssu-fen lü* 四分律 [Precepts edited and revised four times] before ten priests who were recognized as learned in the Buddhist precepts. At the ordination platforms at Kanzeon-ji and Yakushi-ji, they were ordained before five priests.

In the ninth century an additional ordination platform was constructed at the Tendai 天台 temple of Enryaku-ji 延暦寺. At Enryaku-ji's *kaidan* novices swore to observe fifty-eight Buddhist precepts based on the *Fan-wang ching* 梵網經, a Chinese apocryphal text on the Mahayana precepts. Although the Yakushi-ji platform was closed at the beginning of the eleventh century, the other three platforms continued to operate during the middle ages. In principle, all official monks were to undergo the *jukai* ceremony. Novices, twenty years of age, assembled on the ordination platform and swore to observe either the list of 58 or 250 Buddhist precepts (nuns, however, were excluded from receiving ordinations on any of the four ordination platforms). After the ordination ceremony, official monks acquired their offices and ranks and later received food, clothes, and other necessities, in return for which they prayed for the welfare of the emperor and the empire. These duties, however, meant that official monks encountered many restrictions if they wished to perform services for the salvation of women and lepers, conduct funerals, or engage in religious fund-raising (*kanjin* 勧進). The emperor and his bureaucrats had to keep themselves ritually pure in order to engage in religious activities that comprised a major part of their political duties. Thus the official monks had to distance themselves from things that were considered to impart impurity, such as women, lepers, funerals, and fund-raising.

The typical uniform of the official monks was a white surplice; I believe that the color symbolically indicated that they had to keep their distance from impurities. Official monks lived in official temples (*kanji* 官寺) or clan temples (*ujidera* 氏寺, temples dedicated to praying for the welfare of a clan), headed by *bettō*, *zasu*, and *chōja*.

The term *tonseisō* (reclusive monk) is based on the word *tonsei*, which originally meant to withdraw from the secular world and enter the priesthood. In the middle ages, however, it was interpreted to mean becoming a reclusive monk by withdrawing from the officially recognized temples. The leading priests of the Kamakura period—Hōnen 法然, Shinran 親鸞, Eisai 栄西, Nichiren 日蓮, Dōgen 道元, Myōe

明恵, and Eizon 叡尊—were all reclusive monks in this new sense, having left their positions as official monks at such monasteries as Enryaku-ji, Tōdai-ji, or Daigo-ji 醍醐寺. They established orders for other reclusive monks and were treated as the founders of these new orders. The monks in their orders were also called *tonseisō*, and the nuns *tonsei no ama*.

At first, most of their believers were residents of cities such as Kyoto, Nara, and Kamakura. The orders they established included secular believers, which marked one of the most important differences between them and the official monks. Because official monks were bureaucrats they did not need to form orders that included secular believers. In contrast, reclusive monks needed to establish orders that included secular believers because they were not supported by the government. Because they were no longer official monks, they were freed from certain restrictions. In particular, they could pray for the salvation of women and lepers, conduct funerals, and collect contributions, all of which had previously been regarded as involving impurities.

The reclusive monk or nun fervently believed in the founder of his or her sect. This typically found expression in the *soshi-eden* 祖師絵伝, the illustrated scrolls of a founder's biography produced by orders of reclusive monks. Examples are the *Hōnen shōnin-eden* 法然上人絵伝, *Shinran shōnin-eden* 親鸞聖人絵伝, and *Ippen hijiri-e* 一遍聖絵. The *soshi-eden* were used to proselytize among the people. Even though the biographies of many great Buddhist monks were written before the establishment of orders of reclusive monks, they were not described as founders but simply as great Buddhist monks. In contrast, reclusive monks produced *soshi-eden* as soon as their order was established.

The reclusive monk's typical uniform of a black surplice symbolized, I believe, the monks' view of themselves as free to associate with ritually impure people. Reclusive monks created their own initiations and ordination ceremonies (except for Shinran, who rejected the Buddhist precepts and so did not make any provision for ordinations). A remarkable aspect of the orders of reclusive monks is that they permitted women to receive ordinations. Eizon's order, for example, began to ordain women at Hokke-ji (in Nara) in 1249. In addition, temples for reclusive monks were established in cities and the heads were often called *chōrō* 長老. In this way, temples of reclusive monks can be distinguished from the temples of official monks.

I believe that the most important difference between the two types of orders lay in the fact that the Buddhism of the official monks focused on the community while that of the reclusive monks focussed on individuals. The emperor for whom it was the official monk's duty

to pray was not the emperor as an individual, but as the symbol of the entire Japanese community. As a result, individual emperors or retired emperors also constructed many temples for reclusive monks who were to pray for his personal salvation. Because the official monk prayed for the community, I have called this form of Buddhism “community religion.”

In contrast, reclusive monks made it their regular task to pray for the believer’s personal needs and to save the person as an individual. Let us look, for example, at the case of the wife of the Kibitsunomiya Shinto priest’s son. In 1278, Ippen (founder of Ji sect 時宗) met this woman, who soon believed in Ippen’s teachings and was converted to the Ji sect without her husband’s permission. When her husband returned home and learned of her conversion, he became so angry that he tried to kill Ippen. This case clearly indicates that the religion of the reclusive monk was a “personal religion,” directed towards the salvation of all people regardless of differences of gender, age, birth-place, social position, race, and even nationality. The reclusive monk’s faith was a universal religion. Because reclusive monks established their new orders during the Kamakura period, I call their style of Buddhism “Kamakura New Buddhism.”

Shinran and Eizon as Illustrative of Kamakura New Buddhism

In order to better understand my classification of Kamakura New Buddhism, let us take a closer look at the examples of Shinran and Eizon. All modern researchers recognize Shinran (1173–1262) as a typical founder of an order of Kamakura New Buddhism. In contrast, Eizon (1201–1290) is identified as a reformer of “Kamakura Old Buddhism.” These two monks differed particularly in their attitude towards the Buddhist precepts. Shinran rejected the Buddhist vinaya and married at least three women in violation of it. On the other hand, Eizon tried to strictly observe the Buddhist precepts. Few studies have been done on Eizon and his order because of the belief that Eizon did not establish an order. I believe that this is the fundamental reason that Eizon has traditionally been regarded as a reformer of Kamakura Old Buddhism rather than as a representative of Kamakura New Buddhism. In fact, however, Eizon established an order that had over 100,000 believers during his lifetime. According to my research, he and his order worked to save women and lepers, conducted funerals, and collected contributions. In the following pages I will briefly discuss Shinran and Eizon’s life histories in order to further explain the Buddhism of the reclusive monks.

SHINRAN

Shinran is well known as the founder of Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗. He was born in 1173 as a son of Hino Arinori, a middle-ranked nobleman. In 1181, when Shinran was nine years old he entered Shōren'in 青蓮院, a branch temple of Enryaku-ji, where he began his priesthood. Thus, he was an official monk at Enryaku-ji. But in 1201, when he was twenty-nine years old, he abandoned his position as an official monk at Enryaku-ji, entered Hōnen's order, and became a reclusive monk. He wore a black surplice and took part in the salvation of the citizens of Kyoto. In 1207 he was charged with the promotion of the exclusive recitation of Amida's name and banished to Echigo (present Niigata Prefecture) by the government. After the exile was lifted in 1214 he moved to Hitachi; he finally returned to Kyoto sometime after 1231. Even though few believers gathered around him during his lifetime, he is considered the founder of Jōdo Shinshū.

It is difficult to know the concrete details of Shinran's life because only a few documents survive, but we can understand his thought from his writings. Most attention has been paid to his doctrine that the evil person is the chief object of Amida's compassion (*akunin shōki* 悪人正機). Shinran clearly believed that people lacked the ability to gain salvation through their own efforts by observing precepts, making donations to temples, and so on. According to Shinran's teachings, Amida's salvation reaches all people and all people can be saved by Amida if they would chant *namu Amida butsu*, which means "I depend on Amida." In short, he insisted on universal salvation, and sought personal salvation.

EIZON

Eizon was born in Yamato in 1201 as the son of a Kōfuku-ji monk. In 1217 he began his priesthood at Daigo-ji and was ordained on the precepts platform of Tōdai-ji. Thus, he became an official monk of Daigo-ji. In 1234 he received a position at Saidai-ji 西大寺 as an official monk and from 1235 began to study the Buddhist precepts by reading the *Ssu-fen-lü hsing-shih ch'ao* 四分律行事抄 (a commentary on the *Ssu-fen lü* by the T'ang dynasty priest Tao-hsüan 道宣). As he reflected on what he had studied, he found that much of his surroundings deviated from the true teaching of the Buddha. He was convinced that "a priest who does not observe the Buddhist precepts ought not to call himself a Buddhist." He began a movement to restore the Buddhist precepts, joined by three fellow students of the *vinaya*, the priests Ensei 円晴, Ugon 有嚴, and Kakujo 覚盛; Kakujo played an especially important role. They rejected the Todai-ji ordination because they thought the

officiating monks did not observe the Buddhist precepts and were not qualified to be called “*vinaya* masters” (*kaishi* 戒師). In the ninth month of 1236 Eizon and his associates began a self-ordination (*jisei-jukai* 自誓受戒). In this ordination, one becomes a monk by seeking not only enlightenment for oneself but also salvation for others. On the basis of this aspiration, the participants would make a vow before an image of a Buddha or bodhisattva to rigidly observe the precepts by observing certain ceremonial requirements. Eizon completed his self-ordination in the ninth month of 1236; later he became a reclusive monk living in Saidai-ji.

Thus, Saidai-ji, a national temple, became a temple where both official monks and reclusive monks lived separately. In the middle ages a sect of reclusive monks with Eizon as founder came to power at Saidai-ji. This order is usually called the Ritsu 律 sect. Among their notable activities were working for the salvation of lepers and women, performing funerals, and engaging in religious fund-raising. These activities deserve attention because they are typical of Kamakura New Buddhism.

Legends of several of the founders of orders of reclusive monks, particularly Hōnen and Shinran, relate how they cared for lepers (recognized as the most impure people) and prostitutes (the most impure women). But in fact Hōnen and Shinran did nothing of the sort. The existence of such legends indicates that the *ideal* of the reclusive monk was to save women and lepers without concern for their impurity. In short, they tried to save everyone.

Lepers were recognized as one of the most impure of existences. Even worse, they were thought of as *hinin* 有人, literally people not recognized as human. Official monks kept their distance from lepers. In contrast, Eizon and his order made efforts to help lepers all over Japan at more than 1,500 branch temples. They constructed many leper colonies, gave lepers food, and bathed them in hot water infused with medical plants. They also tried to convert them into Buddhist believers and urged them to observe the Buddhist precepts as much as possible. Thus Eizon’s orders played a major role in the care and salvation of lepers.³ Because lepers were expelled from society,

³ At present lepers are medically defined as those who suffer from Hansen’s disease. Because there was no remedy for Hansen’s disease until 1944, it had long been classified as incurable. It is important to note that the definition of “leper” in the Kamakura period was different from that current today. Until thirty years ago Hansen’s disease was confused with many serious skin diseases such as ringworm, some of which could be cured if the patient received proper food and medical attention. This may account for the “miracle” cures of leprosy brought about by Eizon and Ninshō 忍性 (one of Eizon’s top disciples) and other members of the Eizon order.

clan, and family, they were forced to live independently as individuals. Thus, the fact that the Buddhism of reclusive monks sought to save lepers reinforces the view that their Buddhism was a personal religion.

Eizon's orders also played a remarkable part in the salvation of women. In the middle ages, the Ritsu and the Zen sects played a larger role in the salvation of women than other groups. Eizon's orders built many convents, ordained nuns, and converted lay believers. The Hokke-ji 法華寺 convent, which had been the center of national convents in the Nara period, was transformed into a branch temple of Eizon's order, where it became the center of his order's convents. There were two distinguishing features of Eizon's orders of nuns: their ordinations and their advanced esoteric consecrations (*denbō kanjō* 伝法灌頂). The Ritsu sect permitted nuns to be ordained at both the ordination platforms at Saidai-ji and Hokke-ji. In contrast, official monks barred nuns from regular ordinations at their ordination platforms, a fact that suggests that Eizon's reform of nuns' ordinations was important and unusual. In the esoteric Buddhist orders the advanced consecration was the most important ceremony, since monks had to receive it in order to realize enlightenment. It was such an important ceremony that the official monks refused to confer it on nuns. The fact that Eizon permitted nuns to receive it indicated that he recognized the possibility of enlightenment for women. Previously Buddhist monks had argued that women had five obstacles that required them to be reborn as men before they could attain enlightenment; and that prevented them from becoming Brahmā, Indra, a universal ruler, Māra, or a Buddha. Although Eizon's order recognized the five obstacles, it believed that advanced consecrations would eliminate the affects of these obstacles and enable women to realize enlightenment while they still were women.

Again, Eizon's order performed funerals for the common people and even for official monks. The monks of Eizon's order even established graveyards within their temple precincts. Many *gorintō* 五輪塔 (five-section reliquaries), a type of grave marker, were produced by Eizon's order and still remain at their branch temples.

Some readers might suppose that it is natural for monks to perform funerals; after all, Japanese Buddhism often has been called *sōshiki* 葬式 *bukkyō* (funerary Buddhism). However, the performance of funerals was not considered a regular function of Buddhist monks until the establishment of orders of reclusive monks. Official monks had to maintain their distance from the ritual defilements associated with death. Of course, from the ninth century on official monks often performed funerals for emperors and nobles. But when they did so, they had to refrain from performing religious ceremonies for thirty

days because of the death-related ritual pollution. With the advent of orders of reclusive monks the official monks ceded the performance of funerals to these new groups even when emperors were involved. For example, Sennyū-ji 泉涌寺, a temple associated with the Ritsu sect of reclusive monks, became the burial place of the emperors.

Eizon's order also was active in religious fund-raising. Ninshō was designated the supervisor of fund-raising (*daikanjin* 大勧進) at Tōdai-ji; other disciples of Eizon served as heads of fund-raising at various temples, including more than eleven Kokubun-ji temples. Eizon's order also constructed many roads and bridges.

In the middle ages, the construction and repair of bridges, roads, official temples (*kanji*), clan temples (*ujidera*), and other sites was carried out by monks who raised the funds for these projects. Reclusive monks served as supervisors of fund-raising because they were not afraid of the impurity associated with such activities. In contrast, official monks were unable to carry out such "ritually impure" activities.

Finally, the relation between observing the precepts and working for the salvation of others should be mentioned. Certainly when this issue is considered superficially, observing the precepts would seem to hinder a priest from saving people. This idea seems so logical that Shinran, who rejected the observance of the precepts and performed relatively few activities to save people, has been regarded as a typical Kamakura New Buddhism founder. Contrary to this expectation, however, Eizon's order played a far more active role among the people than Shinran's order during the Kamakura period. The members of Eizon's orders believed that they were capable of saving the impure without becoming impure themselves precisely because their strict observance of the precepts protected them from impurities. This allowed them to work to save other people, much as they believed the Buddha had done. In short, observing the precepts was the basis of social action for Eizon's order.



In conclusion, reclusive monks played very different roles from official monks in saving common people and establishing orders that included secular believers. Thus, in my opinion, the defining characteristic of Kamakura New Buddhism is that of the personal religion of the reclusive monk, in contrast to the community religion of the official monk.

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