



James L. Ford, *Jōkei and Buddhist Devotion in Early Medieval Japan*

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. xviii+317 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 0-19-518814-4.

JŌKEI (1155–1213), the early Kamakura period monk of the Hossō school, was one of the most well-known clerics of his age. He was the preeminent Hossō scholar of his generation, writing numerous works on the school's doctrines and Buddhist logic, including the *Jō yuishiki ron dōgaku shō*, a massive compendium of Hossō teachings. He also composed a number of *kōshiki*, liturgical works addressed to various Buddhas and bodhisattvas, testifying to the breadth and richness of his faith. Moreover, towards the end of his life, Jōkei devoted himself to reviving the strict observance of the precepts among the monks of Nara, a movement which subsequently came to full flower with the establishment of the Shingon Ritsu school under the leadership of Eison (1201–1290), Ninshō (1217–1303) and others. Finally, he is most famous as the author of the *Kōfukuji sōjō* of 1205, a petition to the court calling for a ban on Hōnen's rapidly spreading exclusive (*senju*) nenbutsu movement; this petition served as a catalyst for the eventual suppression of the movement and Hōnen's banishment to Tosa province.

Despite Jōkei's fame and importance, the number of studies that have been published on this monk is surprisingly limited. Moreover, this corpus is one-sided and highly biased, since a large number of them focus, not on Jōkei himself, but on the *Kōfukuji sōjō*, inasmuch as this petition triggered the exile of the founder of one of the most important contemporary schools of Japanese Buddhism. (As Ford notes, this reflects what he calls the "ideology of founders," or "the enduring scholarly fixation on new sect founders" (p. 6); more on this point later). Although several recent scholars, including Hiraoka Jōkai, Fukihara Shōshin, Yamazaki Keiki and Kusunoki Junshō, have worked to rectify this imbalance, Jōkei still remains woefully neglected by religious studies specialists in Japan — and all but ignored in the West. In view of this situation, the appearance of Ford's excellent volume, the first book-length study on Jōkei in any language, is truly a very welcome event.

The core of Ford's study consists of a detailed account of Jōkei's life and thought, focusing in particular first on Jōkei's devotional life as reflected in his numerous *kōshiki*, and secondly on a close reading of the *Kōfukuji sōjō* and an analysis of its underlying soteriological presuppositions. It is a masterful survey, based on a wide knowledge of traditional Japanese Buddhist thought, especially the Sino-Japanese Hossō philosophy which has received little attention in the West, as well as contemporary scholarship on Japanese Buddhism. However, Ford's study is more than a

mere intellectual biography of Jōkei. Rather, his ambition is to use Jōkei as a lens through which to re-examine and re-evaluate the received wisdom concerning “Kamakura Buddhism.” And it is this underlying perspective which makes this study one of the most thought-provoking works to appear on Japanese Buddhism in the past several years.

The book is divided into seven chapters grouped into three parts. Part I, entitled “Life and Thought,” discusses Jōkei’s life and his attempt to reform and revitalize Hossō thought. Here Ford focuses on the Hossō doctrine of the five classes of beings, which holds that some beings can never attain Buddhahood nor even gain liberation from the cycle of transmigration. This teaching was the source of much controversy; in the early years of the Heian period, it was the topic of a famous, and unusually bitter, debate between the Hossō monk Tokuitsu and Saichō, the founder of the Japanese Tendai school. (The latter argued, on the basis of the One Vehicle doctrine of the *Lotus Sūtra*, that all beings can attain Buddhahood.) By Jōkei’s time, the position that everyone can gain release from the cycle of transmigration and achieve Buddhahood had apparently become widely accepted. Perhaps spurred on by this development, Jōkei proposed a novel interpretation of the five classes theory, proposing a “middle way” reconciling the traditional Hossō position and the Tendai position of universal Buddhahood. In this way, he tried to bring traditional Hossō doctrine in line with contemporary practice.

Part II, “Practice and Devotion,” turns to Jōkei’s *kōshiki* to consider the devotional aspects of this monk’s religious life. Over his lifetime, Jōkei wrote at least 30 *kōshiki* addressed to various Buddhas and bodhisattvas, making him the most prolific author of this genre of texts. Among the deities invoked in these *kōshiki* are Śākyamuni, Maitreya, Kannon, Jizō, Kasuga, Yakushi, Shōtoku Taishi, even the *Lotus Sūtra* and the Buddha’s relics. Despite such variety, however, the center of Jōkei’s devotion were the triumvirate Śākyamuni (the Buddha of the past), Maitreya (the future Buddha) and Kannon (the bodhisattva working for the salvation of beings in the present age). As Ford notes, Jōkei’s pluralism contrasts with the exclusive devotion to one Buddha (i.e., Amida) advocated by his contemporaries Hōnen and Shinran. Following the standard Hossō position (which is also reflected in the theory of the five classes of beings), Jōkei understood that people have inherited through their past actions (i.e., though their karma) different capacities for practicing the Buddhist path and reaching enlightenment. The different teachings and deities found in Buddhism are a response to this diversity in human capacities. Moreover, Jōkei argued that the law of cause and effect, so fundamental to Buddhism, must be the guiding principle of Buddhist soteriology. Morally speaking, this means that good results are contingent on one’s efforts to practice good. Hence, although Hōnen and Shinran advocated sole reliance on Amida Buddha because this Buddha vowed out of his boundless compassion to save even the most evil being, from Jōkei’s perspective, “excessive emphasis on the absolute power of Amida’s vow to overcome all karmic consequences was fundamentally flawed” (p. 113) because it was incompatible with the principle of cause and effect. In conclusion, Ford emphasizes that “eclecticism in practice and

devotion was the norm for both the tradition and for the age. Exclusivity—despite the piercing single-practice rhetoric—was a minority position” (p. 138).

Interestingly, Jōkei, like Hōnen, saw birth in a Pure Land through the nenbutsu to be a legitimate spiritual goal and accepted the need for reliance on the “other power” of Buddhas and bodhisattvas to achieve that goal. However, although he recognizes the superior status of Amida’s Pure Land, Jōkei was primarily an advocate of birth in Maitreya’s Tuṣita Heaven and Kannon’s Mt. Potalaka. Moreover, as a means of achieving birth in the former realm, he promoted the Maitreya nenbutsu. (Since “nenbutsu” literally means “remaining mindful of the Buddha,” this practice can be directed towards all Buddhas, Maitreya as well as Amida.) Hence, although earlier scholarly literature frequently emphasize the difference between Jōkei and Hōnen, it is clear that the two share some basic presuppositions concerning practice.

Part III, “Jōkei, Hōnen, and Kamakura Buddhism,” begins with a detailed study of the *Kōfukuji sōjō*, a text which Ford contends has been misunderstood and frequently misrepresented. The prevailing tendency among Japanese scholars is to characterize it as a “politically motivated” attack on Hōnen’s attempt to establish a new school. In contrast, Ford argues that it “can be read as a broad, even ‘normative,’ Buddhist critique of Hōnen’s teachings” — “normative” in the sense that it reflects “accepted criteria for establishing a new sect and legitimating doctrinal claims” (p. 160).

The second half of Part III (the final, seventh chapter of the book, entitled “Kamakura Buddhism Reconsidered”), consists of an ambitious attempt to use Jōkei as a lens through which to reconsider the character of Kamakura Buddhism. This is perhaps the most notable section of the book. Ford argues that postwar studies on Kamakura Buddhism follow one of two interpretive approaches. The first, which he calls a “founder-centered” approach, focus almost entirely on the founders of the so-called “new schools of Kamakura Buddhism”, such as Hōnen, Shinran, Dōgen and Nichiren. These founders are described as progressive leaders of popular and innovative spiritual movements, and are contrasted favorably with of the established schools of “old Buddhism” (*kyū Bukkyō*), which are labeled “elitist, institutional, corrupt, oppressive, and demoralizingly complex” (p. 186). Frequently, this paradigm, which pits the “new schools” against the “old schools,” has been used to privilege and legitimate the former, which, after all, constitute the dominant Buddhist schools of contemporary Japan. The second approach, a “sociopolitical” approach based upon Kuroda Toshio’s famous *kenmitsu taisei* (exoteric/esoteric system) theory, focuses on the “sociopolitical role of religious doctrine in spiritually legitimizing power and social status” (p. 189). Although it provides several needed correctives to the founder-centered approach, this theory remains wedded to the traditional view that the old schools are corrupt and reactionary supporters of the oppressive social hierarchy of medieval Japan. In other words, this theory retains the traditional bias towards the new schools, which are characterized as radically egalitarian movements undermining the social hierarchy sustained by *kenmitsu* ideology of the old established school.

Ford, however, argues that both theories distort our understanding of Jōkei. Jōkei has often been described as a reactionary opponent of the new popular religious

movements, primarily on the basis of his *Kōfukuji sōjō*. However, at the same time, recent scholars have emphasized his reformist stance, exemplified by his attempts to revive strict adherence to the precepts. Hence, neither of the theories above, based as they are on a sharp and irreconcilable distinction between a “progressive” new Kamakura schools and “reactionary” old schools, can do full justice to Jōkei’s thought and practice. Ford concludes that “the underlying assumption of a thoroughly corrupt and enervated Buddhism” (p. 193) found in nearly all earlier studies on Kamakura Buddhism needs revision.

Jōkei, Ford continues, provides us with a lens through which we can reconsider the nature of Buddhism during the early Kamakura period. Kamakura monks, Jōkei as well as the founders of the new schools, share a number of characteristics which define the parameters of Buddhist thought and practice during this period. Like many other prominent monks of his age, Jōkei spent most of his life as a recluse, away from (but still keeping in close touch with) the major monastic institutions. Many of his activities, such as fund-raising *kanjin* campaigns to rebuild temples, provided him with opportunities to interact with the general population. (Ford reminds us that many of Jōkei’s *kōshiki* were composed precisely for such occasions.) These points, which are shared by the founders of the new schools, are clearly characteristics of Kamakura Buddhism as a whole. However, Jōkei is often at odds with the founders of the new schools in his interpretation of several key issues of the age. For example, like the founders of the Pure Land schools, he recognized the need to rely on some transcendental power to attain liberation (especially in the age of *mappō* or Latter Dharma), and advocated reliance on the power of the Buddha’s relics and the recitation of dhāraṇī as well as the power of Amida’s vows. But he differed from Hōnen and Shinran in opposing exclusive devotion to Amida Buddha. In Jōkei’s view, since people were of different spiritual abilities, it is wrong-headed to insist that everyone must follow the same path to Buddhahood. Moreover, he insisted that reliance on one’s own efforts and some transcendental power are both necessary and advocated a “middle path” incorporating both “self-power” and “other-power” perspectives in practicing the Buddhist path.

Before closing, I must note several minor mistakes and discrepancies that have crept into the volume. Although the problem of the “correct” reading of the titles of Buddhist texts is a difficult one, I think that the title of one of Jōkei’s *kōshiki*, which Ford gives as *Kingu ryōzen kōshiki*, should be *Gongu ryōzen kōshiki* (pp. 25, 129; cf. *Kokusho sōmokuoku*, vol. 3, p. 598). The name of the hall built in Kōfukuji for the revival of the precepts should be Jōki’in, not Dōki’in. Likewise the name of the modern scholar Inahori Taitsu should be corrected to Imahori Taitsu (p. 79). The correct Buddhist reading for the term meaning “repentance” is *sange*, not *zange* (p. 126, 127). Moreover, it must be noted that both the new and old characters for the word *sūtra* (經 and 經) are used in the list of primary works in the bibliography. In the same list, the correct characters for *Ichijō yōketsu* and *Wang-sheng lun-chu* should be 一乘要決 and 往生論註, not 一乘要訣 and 往生論注, respectively (pp. 265, 266). Incidentally,

the character for “jō” in *Ichijō yōketsu* above is given in its new form, but it may be more appropriate to use its old form 乗.

However, these are minor mistakes that in no way distract from the importance of this volume. It is a splendid book which goes a long way in rehabilitating an unjustly ignored (and, even worse, frequently distorted and maligned) figure of Japanese Buddhism. Along the way, it gives us a fascinating glimpse into Kamakura Buddhism and takes several important steps towards creating a new paradigm for understanding Japanese Buddhism during this age. It is highly recommended to everyone interested in Japanese religions.

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