

## REVIEW



**John K. Nelson, *Experimental Buddhism: Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan***

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013. xxiv+292 pages.  
Cloth, \$60.00; paperback, \$32.00. ISBN 978-0-8248-3833-1  
(cloth); 978-0-8248-3898-0 (paperback).

CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE Buddhism is sometimes criticized in Buddhist Studies, as well as in other disciplines, as “corrupt.” With the establishment of the family *danka* system—“Community temples of all sizes were structured around households (*danka*) that supported the temple and its priest in material ways. Individuals in these households became members of the temple, eligible for memorial rituals for themselves and their ancestors” (35)—in the Edo period, Japanese Buddhism became subordinate to the government and bowed to their authority. In postwar Japan, with the drastic social changes caused by industrialization, urbanization, and an ageing population, some scholars have argued that Japanese Buddhism is losing its original vitality. However, what exactly is Japanese Buddhism facing nowadays? Is it really losing its connections with society? How have Buddhist monks been searching for new ways to adapt themselves to a rapidly changing Japanese society? Contrary to the large number of criticisms of Japanese Buddhism, there is a lack of empirical studies on its current state and development.

John NELSON is a cultural anthropologist and expert on East Asian religion who has published two books on Shinto (1996; 2000) and coedited the *Handbook of Contemporary Japanese Religions* (Brill, 2012). In *Experimental Buddhism* he argues for the “experimentality” (experimental Buddhism) of contemporary Japanese Buddhism based on extensive field studies. The introduction and chapter two explain the background of this book. Chapters three to five present different case studies, followed by a conclusion in chapter six.

In the introduction, the author highlights the overwhelming lack of empirical studies on contemporary Japanese Buddhism. He then proposes—using the concept of “experimental Buddhism”—that case studies of contemporary Japanese Buddhism be based on anthropological fieldwork, which is also the objective of this book.

Chapter one argues that Buddhism in contemporary Japan has been affected by various social changes such as urbanization, individualization, and an ageing population, and is gradually transforming itself to adapt to these changes. The author then discusses the key concept, “experimental Buddhism,” which contains the following five characteristics: 1. the historicity and social transitions of Japanese society can be understood through observing and analyzing this concept; 2. the formation of a religious/spiritual life course based on personal choices becomes possible; 3. one can choose to practice Buddhism before engaging in specific Buddhist traditions; 4. daily life determines the choice of Buddhist values; and 5. this concept fits not only Buddhism but also other religions (22–27).

In chapter two, Nelson reviews the social history of Japanese Buddhism in pre-modern Japan, and then discusses the historical and social features of contemporary Japanese Buddhism within its historical context. While the first part gives an overview of the history of Buddhism before the Second World War, the second part offers important depictions of the characteristics of contemporary Japanese Buddhism (43–69). Some examples include the transformation of the relationships between temples and *danka* along with urbanization and an ageing society, funeral Buddhism, the distress of Buddhist monks expressed in magazines targeted at monks such as *Jimon Koryu*, case studies of the organizational structures of the Rinzai, Tendai, and Pure Land sects, and so forth. These cases allow readers to understand the current situation facing contemporary Japanese Buddhism that are little studied by scholars. Instead of arguing that Japanese Buddhism has deviated from its original teachings, the author suggests that we should put more focus on how Buddhism has been applied to contemporary society and how Buddhist monks have dealt with problems associated with contemporary Buddhism.

In chapter three, Nelson introduces the various social welfare activities conducted by Buddhist priests. He first reviews the history of Buddhism in Japan when it played an important role in welfare activities (as illustrated by Kūya), followed by case studies including NGOs such as the Sōtō Volunteer Association, anti-suicide campaigns led by Buddhist monks, various disaster relief support, and active-listening volunteering.

The stories of four Buddhist monks are presented in chapter four; these monks have also been reported in the local media for their outstanding social activities. They are Rev. Akita Mitsuhiko (Ōten’in in Osaka), Rev. Takahashi Takushi (Jingūji in Nagano), Rev. Hashimoto Junshin (Minna no otera [Everyone’s Temple] in Nara), and Rev. Kiyoshi Fumihiko (Zuikōji in Osaka). The activities they offer are various and differ across denominations; for instance, Rev. Akita has cooperated with NGOs to promote community activities, whereas Rev. Kiyoshi has operated the Vows Bar (“vows” is a pun for *bōzu*). They are also engaged in various social activities. Despite the many differences in their backgrounds, the four monks have achieved something more than an expertise in annual events and funerals can accomplish. Therefore, the author argues, “the activities of progressive Buddhist priests in Japan

are pioneering some of the key concepts, organizations, and programs that can, with perseverance and support, create positive results in society and in the religion itself” (140).

Chapter five evaluates the transformation of Buddhism in a technologically advancing and globalizing world. The author discusses some examples of the commercialization of Buddhism, which include private business operators commercializing funeral services and mortuary tablets, and civic movements seeking a form of funeral ceremony without the presence of traditional Buddhist temples or monks. The popularization of pet memorials is also presented as an example of the privatization of Buddhism. The use of temples for music festivals is also discussed as an example of the modernization of Buddhism, monks, and temples. While social transformations have inevitably undermined the resources that hitherto have nurtured the growth of traditional Buddhism, the author argues that “in many cases, outreach efforts can be compared to the scattering of seeds in the community” (187).

Chapter six concludes the findings of previous chapters, and offers directions for future studies on contemporary Japanese Buddhism. The author suggests that more studies on temples and active-listening volunteering run by Buddhist nuns or female believers are required. And he ends with optimism towards Buddhism by saying, “we do know, however, that despite a shrinking institutional presence for Buddhism in Japan, we can look forward to new types of practices and beliefs that engage rather than withdraw from the expansive complexities of the twenty-first century and beyond” (216).

#### *The Significance of This Book and Further Studies*

A significant contribution of this book is that it presents various dimensions of contemporary Japanese Buddhism based on detailed field studies and analysis. In the sociology of religion in Japan, although there is a strong tradition of qualitative studies of religion, the majority of these works are focused on new religions. Even in the studies of contemporary Buddhism, the prewar history of Buddhism and priests are the main topic of interest for scholars. As also argued by the author throughout this book, there are no empirical studies (or the ones that do exist are inadequate) on contemporary Japanese Buddhism. Consequently, this reviewer has also shifted his interest from Buddhism to new religious movements.

The decline of *danka* and the commercialization of funeral services are problems facing many Buddhist priests and temples. These problems are also deeply connected to various social issues challenging contemporary Japan as a whole, such as an ageing society, globalization, and the decline of community. Having engaged in the sociology of religion for just a short period, the reviewer, after reading this book, has the feeling that empirical studies on contemporary Japanese Buddhism are actually developing continuously. In this sense, focusing on Buddhism has great significance in the studies of the dynamics of Japanese society.

There are a few points that could add further value to this research topic. First, while the book provides detailed case studies of Buddhist monks, the family *danka* system (which is an important component of Japanese Buddhism) is only discussed from a historical perspective in chapter two, and the inclusion of some representative cases of *danka* could offer a more comprehensive picture. For instance, how is the *danka* system related to the social activities carried out by the monks mentioned in chapters three and four? If we look at the “experimentality” of Buddhism through the social activities organized by *danka*, will we observe something different from the arguments in this book? In fact, analyzing recent national surveys (the Japanese General Social Survey), and after controlling important demographic covariates, people answering “Buddhism is my family religion” have a significantly higher tendency to participate in social activities than those who “have no faith,” (TERAZAWA 2012). What kind of “experimental Buddhism” will we observe if we also take into account the studies of *danka* (often regarded as one of the peculiarities of Japanese Buddhism) and the relationships among priests, temples, and *danka*?

The second point is related to the orientation of the case studies. In general, the examples discussed in this book are relatively successful, but it is also necessary to include examples that are somewhat less successful. This can be done by a comparison of the characteristics of the four monks highlighted here. It would also be helpful to highlight specific regions and conduct comprehensive studies of temples in these regions to further understand their activities and the challenges they face (SAKURAI 2008).

Third, and also related to the previous point, is the representation of the social activities organized by Buddhist monks. On some occasions, Buddhist temples may have strong ties with local communities and cooperate closely with other religious groups. Community activities may sometimes involve more than one religion. Moreover, according to my own research, when comparing temples with small shrines and new religious branches, the smaller the temple, the fewer the differences can be observed in terms of their variety and types of activities (YOSHINO and TERAZAWA 2009). Also, as mentioned by the author, the concept of “experimental Buddhism” may also be applied to religions other than Buddhism, and therefore comparative studies with other religions are important issues for further study.

The above-mentioned issues do not affect the significance of this book. As suggested at the beginning of this review, this book is a detailed ethnography of contemporary Japanese Buddhism based on in-depth fieldwork that extracts and analyzes important case studies that are almost ignored by the public. This book should be regarded as mandatory reading on the sociology and anthropology of religion in Japan. I hope that more people will have the opportunity to read this book and continue to explore contemporary Japanese Buddhism.

## REFERENCES

- NELSON, John K.  
 1996 *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.  
 2000 *Enduring Identities: The Guise of Shinto in Contemporary Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- PROHL, Inken, and John K. NELSON, eds.  
 2012 *Handbook of Contemporary Japanese Religions*. Leiden: Brill.
- SAKURAI Yoshihide 櫻井義秀  
 2008 *Tōhoku tai no kaihatsusō: Shūkyō to shakai kōken* 東北タイの開発僧—宗教と社会貢献 [Development monks in northeast Thailand: Religion and social contribution]. Tokyo: Azusa Shuppan.
- TERAZAWA Shigenori 寺沢重法  
 2012 Gendai Nihon ni okeru dentō Bukkyō to shakai katsudō e no sankā: Zenkoku chōsa dēta no keiryō bunseki 現代日本における伝統仏教と社会活動への参加—全国調査データの計量分析 [Traditional Buddhism and social participation in contemporary Japan: A statistical analysis]. In *Ajia no shūkyō to sōsharu kyapitaru* (Soshō "sōsharu kyapitaru to shūkyō 1") アジアの宗教とソーシャル・キャピタル (叢書 ソーシャル・キャピタルと宗教 1) [Religion and social capital in Asia (Social capital and religion series)], Sakurai Yoshihide and Hamada Yō 濱田陽, eds., 60–92. Tokyo: Akashi Shoten.
- YOSHINO Koichi 吉野航一 and TERAZAWA Shigenori  
 2009 Chiikishakai ni okeru "shūkyō no shakai kōken katsudō": Sapporo-shi no shūkyō shisetsu o jirei ni 地域社会における『宗教の社会貢献活動』—札幌市の宗教施設を事例に ["Social activities conducted by religious organizations and groups" in communities: Case studies in Sapporo]. In *Shakai kōken suru shūkyō* 社会貢献する宗教 [Socially contributive religion], Inaba Keishin 稲場圭信 and Sakurai Yoshihide, eds., 160–81. Kyoto: Sekai Shisōsha.

Terazawa Shigenori  
*Hokkaido University*