

Experimental Buddhism: Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan,

by John K. Nelson

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“*Experimental Buddhism: Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan*” won the 2014 Toshihide Numata Book Prize in Buddhism, one of the most prestigious awards given to the books about Buddhism. The author Dr. John K. Nelson is a professor of the University of San Francisco, whose areas of specialization are East Asian and Japanese religions, contemporary Buddhism, cultural anthropology, globalization, secularism, and Asian studies. (See the final page of the book, “About the Author”.)

In this book, Dr. Nelson tries to clarify the complex relationships between the long-standing traditions of Buddhism and the modern society in Japan. He also tries to present the new possibilities of Buddhist monks’ activities. This book has two unique points: first, the author has carefully investigated Japanese society in detail; second, he focuses on some unique attempts by contemporary Japanese Buddhist monks.

In the chapter 1, the author gives us the overview of the huge impact of modern Japanese society upon Buddhism. In Japan, the globalization and individualization have proceeded extremely rapidly since the beginning of the modern era. And, needless to say, the society and religion are not able to be separated. In this chapter, Dr. Nelson points out that “the Experimental Buddhism” in Japan emphasizes the importance of the interface between Buddhist traditions and modernity. Such argument is very important in this book, and also considered to be its thoroughbass.

In the chapter 2, first, the history of Buddhism since the ancient time period in which Buddhism was first introduced into Japan is well summarized. Second, the conflicts between Japanese Buddhism and the movement and policy such as the “abolition of Buddhism and destruction of Shakyamuni” and the “ordinance of distinguishing Shinto and Buddhism” are explained. And third, the relationships between modern Buddhist temples, monks, and common people are discussed. According to the author, today, 85% of all income of Japanese Buddhist temples are occupied by the ceremonial occasions, mainly the funeral services. His research reveals that some Japanese people seem to think that the future of Japanese Buddhism will not be bright. For example, in a certain symposium, audience members said “Priests have little awareness of social problems” (p.47). On the other hand, a lot of Japanese Buddhist monks face various personal or professional problems. For example, they frequently say “How can we teach children about the meaning of funerals?” (p.50) As

mentioned above, numerous concrete and vivid opinions of both ordinary people and monks make this book really persuasive. At the end of the chapter, the author expresses his own opinions as follows.

- 1, Public perceptions that temples are little more than places for funeral Buddhism (葬式仏教) and that priests are aloof and money hungry should be countered more aggressively (p.67).
- 2, Leadership of national denominations should figure out how to get more people through the doors of a temple (p.68).
- 3, Buddhist denominations should explore how to capitalize upon a very real public pride in Japan's cultural heritage and the contributions Buddhism has made to society over the centuries (p.68).
- 4, People of all should know about Japan's long Buddhist history and heritage can become more than artifacts and stories of golden age never to return (p.69).

These opinions are correct. We should consider how ordinary people who are not a Buddhist monk participate in the temple activities as well as how Buddhist monks engage in the public activities.

In the chapter 3, Dr. Nelson introduce that some welfare activities which Japanese Buddhist monks engage in. These activities are known as the “Engaged Buddhism” recently. Originally, in Japan, Buddhist monks have played an important role in welfare and charitable activities from the old days. Against these historical backgrounds, he introduces the charitable work of the Buddhist NGO, Sōtō Volunteer Association (SVA), in the Hanshin Awaji earthquake happened in 1995. Dr. Nelson also introduces the activity which the monks conduct in cooperation with NPO in order to tackle the serious suicide problem. Today, the suicide rate has surpassed about 30,000 people each year in Japan. Thus, the above-mentioned activity is worthy of special mention. In addition, Café de Monk also where the monks listen carefully to the Higashi Nihon earthquake victims is introduced (p.101).

In the chapter 4, the author focuses on four Japanese Buddhist monks and attempts to explain “the Experimental Buddhism” more specifically. Rev. Akita Mitsuhiko (Ōtenin temple) works together with NPOs in order to organize numerous symposia, concerts, performances, and lectures every year. Thus, Ōtenin temple is called “event temple” (p.118). Rev. Takahashi Takushi (Matsumoto Jingūji temple), the author of *Tera yo! Kaware!* (2009), conducts a lot of welfare activities and volunteers not only in Japan, but also in foreign countries. For example, he works in New Guinea, Thailand, and Chernobyl (pp.121-122). Rev. Hashimoto Junshin (Jūrin-in temple) opened “Everyone’s Temple” in Nara in which there are no barriers of time, culture, or space, therefore people are able to have direct conversation with priests (p.126). Rev. Kiyoshi Fumihiko (Zuikōji temple) opened “Vows Bar” (“vow” has some alliteration with the Japanese word *bōzu* which means a “monk”)

where everyone can talk freely and drink alcohol with monks (p.136). These four person's activities are greatly experimental, innovative, and practical, and they successfully correspond with the complex conditions of Japanese modern society. Each activity improves our common knowledge of Buddhist monks and temples, and seems to cause a kind of paradigm shift for Japanese Buddhism (p.138).

In the chapter 5, the author attempts to answer the following question: how do Japanese economic and technological progress and the globalization change the usual Buddhism or Buddhist services? And new interments, memorial services for ancestors' souls, and pet memorials are introduced. In addition, the temples which produce a wide variety of performances and those which expand their outreach activities in order to attract people are also introduced. Among them, the case of pet memorial is especially interesting, because we can know the attitudes toward the animals in contemporary Japanese Buddhism through it (pp.160-164).

In the chapter 6, continuing from the chapter 4, the activities of two monks are introduced. The first is Rev. Miura Akari's activities (Myōshinji temple). She sings a song and plays an acoustic guitar in her sermon. Second, Rev. Kawakami Takafumi's activities (Shunkōin temple) are introduced. He attempts to connect yoga, meditation, and Rinzai Zen each other. After introducing these activities, Dr. Nelson concludes this book as follows. "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 (p.216)."

In addition to detailed hearing surveys, the author also researches the web sites of monks who are introduced in this book. Therefore, *Experimental Buddhism* contains rich beneficial information not only for western people but also for Japanese. He introduces some monks and their activities that even Japanese people have never known. This book teaches us again that the recent activities of Japanese monks are exceedingly innovative.

How will Japanese Buddhism change in the future? Of course, we shouldn't consider it optimistically. However, I expect for the front runners' attempts which appropriately lead Japanese Buddhism and society in the future.

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