

<BOOK REVIEWS>Experimental Buddhism :  
Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan,  
by John K. Nelson.

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journal or publication title	Japan review : Journal of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies
volume	28
page range	246-248
year	2015-12-15
URL	<a href="http://doi.org/10.15055/00006031">http://doi.org/10.15055/00006031</a>

## BOOK REVIEW

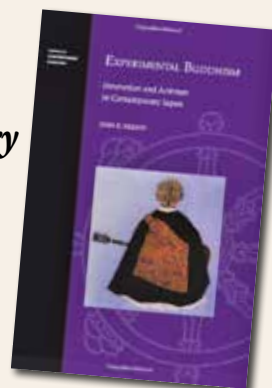
*Experimental Buddhism:  
Innovation and Activism in Contemporary  
Japan*

**John K. Nelson**

University of Hawai'i Press, 2013

320 pages.

ISBN 978-0-8248-3833-1 (cloth); ISBN 978-0-8248-3898-0 (paperback)



A few paragraphs into *Experimental Buddhism* John Nelson asks us to “wonder about the social impact, in a small island nation, of roughly 205,000 Buddhist priests administering over 76,000 registered temples. What contributions have they made to one of the most productive and innovative societies in the world?” (p. xiii). This question also sets the parameters of his enquiry; the book is about Japanese Buddhist temple priests. Within this sharply defined (and overwhelmingly male) group, Nelson identifies considerable diversity. Not only is there no Buddhism, only Buddhisms (p. 5), but most individual temples are inherited family businesses and must respond to the changing market in order to survive. When in the late twentieth century the Japanese economy boomed and there was plenty of cash available for the funerals and memorial rites which provide 85 percent of temple income (p. 43), the early twenty-first century has seen economic stagnation, continuing rural depopulation and new individualistic attitudes characteristic of late modernity, including scepticism about religion, as well as competition from market-savvy corporate funeral providers. Hence, many Buddhist temples face an uncertain future. Temple priests are often reluctant heirs of the family business and are seldom equipped with the personal, intellectual or commercial skills, or indeed the motivation to turn the declining fortunes of their temples round. An anonymous priest writes in the journal *Jiin no genzai* (Contemporary Temples) that, when priests get chatting, they first complain about the taxes they have to pay to their denominational HQ, then about demanding parishioners and relations with the head temple, then the talk turns to golf, karaoke, women and cars (p. 52).

This at least seems to be the case for the great majority of priests in Japan's Buddhist temples. In *Experimental Buddhism* Nelson goes looking for some exceptions to the rule: priests (including two women) who are promoting new ideas, new activities and new models of temple Buddhism; and projects which Nelson collectively labels “experimental Buddhism.” The author is appropriately modest about the limited scale of his study, which is based primarily on visits to forty five temples with a preference for “average institutions whose primary purpose is to provide Buddhist rituals focusing on the memorialisation of ancestors.” After an “executive summary” of Japanese Buddhist history for non-specialists, the book examines examples of social welfare and Buddhist-inspired activism (Chapter 3), four prototypes of “experimental Buddhism” (diverse projects which might provide a template for others) (Chapter 4), and alternatives and innovations in religious practice

(Chapter 5), which looks at a variety of innovative enterprises from a Buddhist drinking bar to temple-hosted concerts and fashion shows. The conclusion looks into the crystal ball, and offers for Japanese Buddhist temples a forecast of “cloudy, increasing storms, with intermittent clearing” (p. 215).

This is an extremely interesting book offering many examples of innovative activities; it should be read by anyone studying Japanese religions. I raise the following four observations in the spirit of encouraging further research in an area which Nelson has very helpfully opened up. Firstly, the research “emphasises ethnographic fieldwork,” but in this book the fieldwork is limited to the voices of priests, whose perspectives on their own temples are the main focus. As Nelson says “one missing element of this study is opinions from ... the common person” (p. xx), because this would entail far larger-scale research. Less understandable, given that making women invisible is a well-recognized feature of both Buddhist denominations and older academic research, is why priests’ wives were omitted from the research design. As Nelson points out (p. 183), the priest’s wife acts:

... as an intermediary between her husband and the temple’s parishioners (*danka*) ... She is called ‘the guardian of the temple’ (*bōmori*) in True Pure Land, a term that could be applied to the wide-ranging responsibilities of temple wives in all denominations. She is usually involved with every women’s or children’s group active in the temple. She represents the temple at regional gatherings of priests’ wives, acts as an assistant to her husband in all aspects of running the temple (including major ritual events such as funerals), maintains good relations with the wives of the temple’s board of directors and *danka*, and usually receives little or no salary for her efforts.

The priest is also her husband and thus susceptible to her close influence, so elucidation of the temple wife’s role in the various examples of “experimental Buddhism” documented in this book might have been expected, yet in most cases we are not even told if a priest is married or not. Since Nelson identifies “nontraditional backgrounds” of priests as possibly correlating with “experimental” Buddhism (p. 246, n. 24), ignoring marital influence as a variable seems an unfortunate omission.

Secondly, I might take issue with “experimental Buddhism” as both an improvement on McMahan’s “Buddhist modernism” and a descriptor for a process unique to the turn of the twenty-first century (pp. 26–27). The world may be differently different these days, but Japanese Buddhists have not begun to experiment only in our own era. My own limited research on Irish Buddhists in Japan at the turn of the nineteenth/twentieth century (Dhammaloka, Charles Pfoundes) has led me to appreciate that a good number of Japanese Buddhists of that period were feisty, independent-minded, radical, innovative and thoroughly “global” in their perspectives and interests. Their experiments with Buddhism in the fast-changing religio-socio-political context of Meiji Japan were stimulated and amplified by new technologies such as mass print media, easy international travel by rail and steamship and—which is often forgotten—instantaneous global communication via the telegraph (a.k.a. “the Victorian internet”).

Thirdly, “experimental Buddhism” is an etic academic term not, so far as I can tell, embraced (yet?) by any of its priestly proponents. As such, it hardly makes sense to exclude from this theoretical category the Buddhist postwar “new religions” including “successful”

ones such as Sōka Gakkai, Shinnyoen and Risshō Kōseikai. These all started as experiments in tailoring Buddhism to the masses. Hence identifying “experimental Buddhism” only within today’s “traditional” temples and their priests appears as an artifice of the research project, not a construct derived from the Japanese data.

Finally, two Shinto priests are mentioned in passing in the course of the book, because of their individual engagement with Buddhist experiments. The paucity of references to Shinto might lead a casual reader to forget that in Japan the 96 million Buddhists and 106 million Shintoists (numbers as exaggerated by the religious organizations) are largely the same people, that the division of functions between shrines and temples is negotiable, and that shrines and temples therefore face very similar problems. *Experimental Shinto*, anyone?

**Reviewed by Brian Bocking**