

BOOK REVIEWS

Popular Buddhism in Japan

Shin Buddhist Religion and Culture

By Esben Andreasen

HONOLULU: UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII PRESS, 1998
248 PAGES

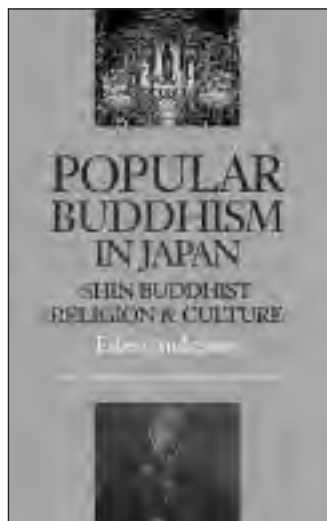
When most Westerners think about Buddhism, especially Japanese Buddhism, they envision Zen. From *zazen*, to tea ceremony, to rock gardens, the Western conception is that Zen is Japan. Esben Andreasen begins by dispelling this notion: “. . . Zen is a minority sect and in many respects it is not very different from other branches of Buddhism” (ix). In fact, when delving deeper into Japanese Buddhism, the predominant sect to emerge is Shin Buddhism. Andreasen’s intention in *Popular Buddhism in Japan* is to show the diversity of Shin and its impact on Japanese culture.

The bulk of research dealing with Japanese Buddhism focuses on historical aspects as opposed to the state of Buddhism in Japan today. For good reason, Buddhism is in such a state of flux that most texts relegate it to the dustbin. It is too often inferred that Buddhism is only a religion for the elderly of Japan and that the priests are no longer spiritual guides but undertakers and purveyors of ancestor worship. When one visits Japan, it seems that the temples are only tourist attractions, much like the cathedrals of Europe. However, the author gives a different point of view and clearly demonstrates that Shin is still a vibrant religion in Japan.

Shin Buddhism is known in Japan as *Jōdo Shinshū*, or “The True Pure Land Religion.” Today, Shin is one of the most important schools of Buddhism in Japan and is divided into two factions, Hongangi and Otani, both of which are based in Kyōto. The author did his research in the Hongangi branch as a visiting researcher at Otani University in Kyōto. The selections of modern Shin Buddhist thinkers, rituals, and selections on culture come mainly from the Hongangi school.

The book begins by giving a brief introduction to the development of Buddhism. This section assumes that the reader already has a basic understanding of Buddhist concepts. The author draws a parallel to Lutheran Protestantism as both religions focus mainly on faith. Like Martin Luther, Shinran (1173–1263), the founder of Jōdo Shinshū, faced banishment and exile. Shinran preached a form of Buddhism with little similarity to the original teachings. He dropped the monastic ideal and substituted it with a lay community. Priests were allowed to marry, a practice most Japanese Buddhist sects follow to this day. Shinran believed enlightenment could be attained by anyone, providing his/her faith was true and that it came from the heart.

The author doesn’t remain stranded in explaining Shin beliefs and practices. Instead, Andreasen provides an introduction



to Shin within Japanese life and culture. Chapter two, entitled “Shin Buddhism in the Modern Age,” has many short excerpts from modern thinkers who analyze Shin’s place in the world today. One of the best known of these thinkers is D. T. Suzuki, who is known for introducing Buddhism to the West. Although Suzuki has written extensively on Zen and is mainly known for his book *Zen and Japanese Culture*, many of his writings deal with Shin Buddhism. Suzuki’s texts comparing Shin with Christianity and Shinran with Kierkegaard are of particular interest to the reader.

The influence of Shin on Japanese culture is reflected in the chapter devoted to arts and crafts. Issa Kobayashi (1763–1827), a haiku poet, composed much of his poetry as a reflection of his Shin beliefs. *Nōh* theater, woodblock prints, Buddhist parables, and much of Japan’s literary tradition have been influenced by Shin. The author keeps the excerpts short, allowing the chapter to flow.

Andreasen gives a detailed explanation of the rituals of the Hongangi temple. A map of the temple is given with a brief description of the landmarks and their significance. *Ho-onko*, a yearly ritual in Shin, is presented through the author’s eyes as he assumes the role of a passive observer. An interesting ritual in the temple’s tradition is the *Susu-harai* (house cleaning) in which members beat the *tatami* mats with sticks and whisk the dust out with fans. The intention of these rituals demonstrates the sincerity of the participants showing their devotion and faith to the Shin community. The chapter devoted to ‘Death and Burial’ is quite fascinating to read. The author concludes with an interview which asks questions many Westerners would have concerning funerals and ancestor rituals.

A topic of interest to many teachers is the establishment of Buddhist schools and education in Japan. Since the U.S. Occupation of Japan (1945–1952), an emphasis was put on secular education in accordance with the United States’ intention to separate church and state. However, Mombusho, Japan’s Ministry of Education, has begun to allow more religious education. Most cities in Japan have Buddhist primary and secondary schools, as do many universities throughout Japan. Shin education is detailed, and again, the author presents another interview, this one with the president of Otani University.

The book concludes by extending beyond Japan and the spread of Shin to Hawaii. This portion of the book is intriguing, as it shows how Shin was an important part of life for many Japanese immigrants. Short excerpts are given about the Picture Brides, the effects of Pearl Harbor on the immigrants, and the transformation of Shin in a new land. Perhaps the greatest change facing Shin, according to the author, is the rise of the New Religions and the tensions they bring. Shin must face new reforms or face losing

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new members in an age when the New Religions entice many Japanese from the traditional religious beliefs.

Popular Buddhism in Japan is very accessible to the reader due to the many illustrations, photographs, excerpts, and interviews. For many teachers, this book gives a well-rounded introduction to a religious sect often ignored in the West. The chapters are concise, and they avoid any over-interpretation of Buddhist thought. In fact, the opposite is true; a greater emphasis is placed on Shin in the context of culture and the modern age.

This book would make a wonderful addition to a university course on Japanese religions, and indeed, to almost any course dealing with Buddhism or Japanese history. The short texts found throughout the book would be ideal for a high school world history or Asian studies course. The author provides a brief introduction to each text, enough to place the reading in context for the student. Best of all, the bibliography is very extensive and allows the reader to pursue a further examination of Shin Buddhism. ■

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A Lateral View

Essays on Culture and Style in Contemporary Japan

By Donald Richie

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA: STONE BRIDGE PRESS, 1992
245 PAGES

Most English-speaking travelers to Japan have probably encountered Donald Richie's writings. Some of his other books include *Taste of Japan*, *The Japanese Tattoo*, *Japanese Cinema*, *Japanese Film*, *Films of Akira Kurosawa*, *Introducing Japan*, *Introducing Tokyo*, *The Temples of Kyōto*, *Geisha*, *Gangster*, *Neighbor and Nun*, and *Public People, Private People*. A past film curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Richie has lived in Japan for forty-five years. As someone who lives in two cultures, Richie's awareness of both cultures makes him a penetrating observer of Japanese life.

This compact (about 5 by 7 inches) book contains a collection of twenty-eight essays written between 1962 and 1989, mostly in the 1980s. The essays appeared in diverse and difficult-to-find places including the *Japan Society Newsletter*, *Japan Times*, *Japan Foundation Newsletter*, *Travel and Leisure* and *East-West Film Journal*, among others. The collection is divided into six sections representing broad themes, Japanese rhythms and shapes, Tokyo, language and signs, dramatic arts, cinema, and contemporary popular culture.

I put this book on my shelf next to works on contemporary culture: *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture* by Martinez;



RECORDS OF WIND AND EARTH: A TRANSLATION OF FUDOKI, WITH INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARIES

by Michiko Y. Aoki

In A.D. 713, the Japanese central government ordered all provincial governors to compile surveys of their respective regions, including products, animals, plants, land conditions, etymologies of place names, legends, and oral traditions. The five extant "old" *fudoki* translated in *Records of Wind and Earth* are all that remain of these early reports. Three of these *fudoki* (Harima, Bungo, and Hizen) are being made available here for the first time in English. This collection

contains invaluable records for any English-speaking person wishing to understand the early history of Japan—its land, its people, and its earliest literature.

Monograph 55. ISBN 0-924304-32-4. 1997. 364 pages, cloth. List price: \$36 (AAS Members) \$29.00

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