

The third and final section is on whether ultimate emptiness is knowable and effable. Since the dGe lugs pa and Mipham are discussing a different ultimate emptiness, they unavoidably end up with different conclusions. The dGe lugs pa delineate an ultimate emptiness that is a mere absence of hypostatic existence, and hence an existent phenomenon that is epistemologically knowable and expressible in language. Mipham's ultimate is far more radical, a complete freedom from all conceptual constructs; from the point of view of ultimate truth it is beyond the reach of ordinary language, even if within the reach of the enlightened being's intuitive gnosis; nevertheless, from the perspective of relative truth, it can still be approached through language and logical analysis. Hence while the dGe lugs pa tend towards eliminating the mystical and paradoxical statements of the Mahāyāna *sūtras* and *śāstras* altogether, by interpreting them as merely figurative and then strictly subordinating them to logical propositions, Mipham happily accommodates them as expressive of higher modes of perception and discourse, that exist alongside the conventional language analytic philosophical approaches of the relative truth. Thus Mipham seeks to strike an even balance between his twin loves of scholastic rationality and rDzogs chen mysticism.

The book ends with some concluding remarks that draw together the various themes, and which reiterate Mipham's Ris med background, and his irenic attempts to harmonise dissenting views as partially expressed truths rather than falsehoods.

There are also appendices, containing translations of some of Mipham's letters made in reply to his critics.

Perhaps the only true negative about this book is its price: since it will be an indispensable possession for any serious student of Tibetan Madhyamaka, in an ideal world, it would cost less than it does. Yet academic publishing being what it is, there is probably no viable alternative for RoutledgeCurzon.

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Letters of the Nun Eshinni: Images of Pure Land Buddhism in Medieval Japan,
James C. Dobbins (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004),
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Consider a study of post-sixteenth-century German religious reform opening this way:

Behind the modern Luther stands the medieval Luther, and by not paying fully serious attention, now in the twenty-first century, to Luther's personal encounters with the Devil and to his inequalitarian language about women, German Christian modernists are one-sidedly misrepresenting Luther's teachings and perhaps even the whole Reformation.

This would be a rough analogue to the message of James Dobbins's provocative study based especially on the earliest stage of Shin Buddhism.

Eshinni (1182–1268?) was the somewhat obscure wife of the Japanese Kamakura Buddhist thinker Shinran (1173–1262). She is best known in Japan for a set of her letters discovered in 1921, which served as confirming evidence for the actual historical existence of Shinran and became important sources of information for his modern biographical study. In this text Dobbins treats several topics which are related to Eshinni, who has not

been viewed in herself as a very important figure in past appreciations of Shin Buddhist history, but whom Dobbins tries to put in a position of greater stature.

The first topic is the sketchy historical evidence about Eshinni herself. This includes a partly speculative narrative reconstruction of her life (Chapter 1) for which the main source is the letters themselves, and then an annotated English translation of the letters (Chapter 2).

The author's driving interest, though, is in three broader themes, which use Eshinni as a springboard. The first of these is how Eshinni serves as a guide to recovering the archaic, medieval qualities of Buddhism in Shinran's time (Chapter 3). After a summary of Eshinni's likely context in agrarian life and the social stratification and stagnation of production of the era, Dobbins argues that modern presentations of Shin have stood too much under the influence of elite philosophical interpretations. Instead, in medieval times Pure Land teachings, including Shinran's, appealed to people much more simplistically and accessibly because of their representation of a transcendental Pure Land paradise. Thus they succeeded historically for reasons that were out of tune with Shinran's sophisticated, official nondualist message. An example pertaining to Eshinni is that although the distinctive Shinranesque elite interpretation was that the 'Pure Land' referred to a formless realm of absolute enlightenment, and strictly speaking neither 'women' nor 'men' could karmically exist after 'entrance' there, the letters of Eshinni suggest that she imagined she would be reborn in the Pure Land while literally retaining the form of a woman.

Second, Eshinni serves as a way of exploring women and Buddhism generally in medieval Japan (Chapter 4). After a survey of women in medieval life, Dobbins argues that few women *religiosi* in medieval Japan were cloistered away from the world, but that most were rather active in it like Eshinni. She and Shinran were part of a world that was family-centered and not much interested in classical concepts of Buddhist monasticism. Presumably Eshinni was a partner to Shinran in the reconfiguration of Buddhist teachings, which famously wiped away the convention of monastic celibacy and the categorical distinction between monk and lay. In this chapter Dobbins nicely summarizes the strong social role of women in early Shinshū. In premodern Asian Buddhist history, Shin was probably the mildest offender against women.

Third, Eshinni serves as an entry point for Dobbins's argument about modernist distortion or expurgation in depicting the medieval world of Eshinni and Shinran. In the interests of an edificationist twentieth century presentation of Shinran, that world's premodern features – dreams, miracles, supernormal beings, cultic sites – have been suppressed in order to present an inaccurately timeless mythic Shinran who accords with a twentieth-century scientific worldview. In the original medieval context, for example, Eshinni probably thought her husband was a manifestation of Kannon – not the way Shinran is usually presented today.

Dobbins's study is an important contribution and will become a common reference in English for certain issues relating to Pure Land. Most impressively concentrating a great deal of detailed information, the text is a patiently worked-out puzzle put together from the (as usual) widely scattered Japanese sources, conveyed in lucid style. The author provides excellent summaries of numerous issues in social history drawn from leading authorities, such as how private letters were written in the Kamakura period or the multiple meanings of 'nuns' during the period.

However, readers should be thoroughly aware that the author is overtly aiming to be provocative rather than balanced. During his career as a scholar, Dobbins has been immersed in contemporary Shin sectarian scholarship, and this book seems to be a counter

reaction which is governed by the observation that contemporary Shin tradition has over-represented its sources, especially the figure of Shinran, as modern. At a certain level of explication, this is of course demonstrably true. However, the contrary structure of the author's particular treatment must be grasped with care.

Dobbins sets up a crude temporal dichotomization: a one pole a medieval version of Shin (apparently the *entire* five-hundred year premodern period) which was concrete and popular, versus at the other pole his so-called modernist (post-Meiji) idea of Shin, which is philosophically subtle but recent and elitist. This temporally tensioned paradigm subordinates continuities and ignores the conventional understanding that popular and elite interpretations subtly coexisted during the long course of the tradition – as would the normal case in religious histories, and a point important to grasp from a Mahāyāna epistemological perspective. This mirrors Dobbins's dichotomy between a superhuman Shinran of the past and a perfectly human Shinran of today.

Dobbins wants to goad the standard interpretation by actively privileging wherever possible any conceivable available evidence about the folk historical side of Shin. In spite of a caveat on page 151 (medieval Shin 'is neither truer nor more significant' than modern Shin), the book tends to communicate a sense that the 'original' popular medieval Shin reception is somehow more 'authentic' than the elite version. Thus Chapter 3 defends a dualistic understanding of the Pure Land against the more sophisticated nondualistic view, although the latter is taken in orthodox interpretation as the interesting characteristic of Shinran's thought. In this argument, Dobbins is confident that any relatively sophisticated idea of Buddhism was out of reach of the great majority of past Shin members, an ambitious claim that is difficult to prove either way.

On women, although Dobbins's opinion of Shinshū is mostly positive, it also reflects an unproblematized feminist critique of Buddhism, which has developed among Western scholars based on essentialist assumptions about maleness, and femaleness, which were not present in Buddhist Asia in the same way. In a couple of places, Shinran's texts retained language concerning the idea that women would have to be transformed into men in order to be reborn in the Pure Land. Dobbins offers a thin critique of this apparently discriminative language which disregards standard Shin explanation. (Shin explanation is that women were not born into the Pure Land for the same reason that slaves were not born there, because female karmic status and slavery were objectively bad situations, and thus to be awarded male karmic status was a sympathetic gift of freedom. Current 'merely-philosophical' scholarship also holds that Shinran quite seriously maintained no significant fundamental interest in male-female distinction). The book's treatment of women seems contradictory on a methodological level because, while it criticizes the selective anachronism of his so-called Shin modernists (anachronism which flatters the philosophical interests of modern Japanese Buddhists), Dobbins combines this with the selective anachronism about women (which flatters interests such as feminism which are equally modernist in character).

Overall Dobbins portrays his folk-oriented historical critique of modern edificationist Shin writers on Shinran as a swing of the pendulum (p. 151) from one set of interests back to another. However, as the author himself expresses briefly (p. 108), the purposes of these two kinds of perspectives are not the same: contemporary Shin writers have been concerned with the derivation of contemporaneously applicable religious thought, and of course, practical interpretive selectivity is endemic to all traditions of ideas. Yet despite a few disclaimers by the author, the book renders a suggestion of illegitimacy in modernist Shin interpretation. Dobbins finds that there is a 'medieval Shinran standing

behind the modern one' (p. 151). Suppose in a discussion of modern Roman Catholicism the statement was highlighted that there is a 'medieval Thomas Aquinas standing behind the modern one'. To what extent, and of what, is this a critique? Does it imply that modern Catholic theologians who overlook Aquina's angels are somehow out to pasteurize Catholic thought? If *nāga* serpents are located protecting Sākyamuni Buddha, are modern apologetic renditions of Buddhist teachings compromised or falsified?

Ultimately, overcoming his own caveats, Dobbins's contrarian approach conveys that little of a modernly interesting nature is present in the 'real' long-term Shin tradition, with the possible exception of Shin's relatively gender-neutral male-female relations (and only at the earliest stage). With some of its major classical emphases sidelined by this viewpoint, such as the teaching of Shinran's textuality, the tradition mostly turns into little more than another variant of Japanese folk Buddhism. A notable problem with the presentation is the target audience. In Japanese, this book would be an intelligible part of a rich, ongoing scholarly give and take and its contribution would be understood against a deep mainstream background context. But it would be completely disingenuous not to recognize that the English-language reception will be quite different. In spite of the fact that Shin is still the largest traditional Buddhist institution in Japan, and by some accounts the most traditionally reformist of Asian Buddhist traditions, a majority of Western academics seem to avoid Shin, and it remains understudied in view of its actual weight. Dobbins's polemical account is dropped into a non-neutral international scholarly environment in which very few people have a prior balanced idea of the normal Shin institution is. For this reason, only a fraction of his probable audience will have an adequate conception of what an even-handed discourse about Dobbins's topics would sound like.

In fairness, in his afterward, reflecting on his own work, Dobbins himself suggests the narrowness of focusing on the mythically-contested Shinran as a methodology for understanding Shin tradition (p. 152). Certainly over time a more valid historical view will emerge describing Shin Buddhism as a dynamic, multidimensional tradition, like other religions in short, and thus a tradition with a long, complex development based in Shinran and his medieval experiences but not quite identical to them. Dobbins's study will surely be a prime stimulus to the further expansion of English-language scholarship in that direction.

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