does the normative image of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism actually conform to the actual practice on the ground? My suspicion is that unless these schools were untainted by the syncretistic and pluralistic character of virtually all other forms of Japanese religion, there has always been considerable dissonance between the actual and the ideal, making the heretofore normative model even more problematic. An ethnographic study along these lines would have added an important perspective to this collection. Aside from this omission, the contributors to this volume have begun to fill a gaping lacuna in our understanding of Pure Land practice.

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Until relatively recently, the medieval period of Japanese Buddhism was characterized as one in which the founders of new Buddhist sects promoted simple forms of practice to the general populace in an active critique of the corrupt institutions of mainstream Buddhism. More recently, largely under the influence of Kuroda Toshio, there has been a shift of attention to the interrelations between the major social institutions of medieval Japan, the court, the Bakufu, and the monasteries. This shift of focus has changed attention from the new forms of Buddhism that have come to be dominant in the present to the forms that were dominant at the time. This is more than a change in intellectual fashion, but rather represents an important shift in the epistemology of scholarship. Previously what was taken to be of most importance about the medieval period was defined by what is important today, a retrospective historiography—one that is not simply diachronic, but takes the present as its point of view and looks backward. The newer approach raises the synchronic question: what was important at the time?

Mark Unno’s Shingon Refractions: Myōe and the Mantra of Light contributes to this latter perspective on medieval Japanese Buddhism. Myōe was a central figure in Kamakura-era Buddhism who, until recently, was almost entirely unknown in Western-language scholarship. Similarly, the recitation of the mantra of light (kōmyō shingon) was a religious practice that had widespread appeal during the Kamakura era, yet, unlike nenbutsu recitation or kōan practice, has not been studied in any detail in Western-language scholarship.

Unno’s work picks up several different strands in order to provide a comprehensive understanding. He examines the history of the mantra of light as a practice originating in Indian Buddhism, the social and intellectual context of its use in medieval Japan, a biography of Myōe as the context for his interest in the mantra of light, a study of the cosmology of the imagination comparing Myōe and Zhuangzi, and translations of six of Myōe’s texts on the mantra of light. By weaving these various strands together, Unno gives us a multidimensional understanding of this practice. Given the interests of this journal’s readership, rather than survey all aspects of
Unno’s work, I would like simply to highlight a few that have direct philosophic significance.

The change in the epistemology of scholarship alluded to above opens lines of inquiry not previously available to research. For this reviewer one of the philosophically most important of these is the question of the efficacy of religious practice—and how it is understood by, in this case, medieval Japanese Buddhists. As a consequence of the history of Western thought over the last century and a half, our own present time presumes a psychological orientation and expects a psychological answer to this question. Indeed, the very question would generally be understood as a psychological one. A synchronic historiography would seek to understand how Buddhists in any sociocultural period understand the answer to this question on their own terms, rather than on ours. The question of a contemporary interpretation or application of Buddhist thought is, however, a separate question, but still one that should be grounded on an understanding of the differences in such central issues as conception of the self, of the path, and of the goal. It would seem that for Myōe, the constructed nature of the self is not separable from the effects of karma.

In addition to differing conceptions of the self, differing conceptions of materiality, embodiment, sexuality, and their relation to effective religious practice also need to be taken into account. For example, the mantra of light was employed to empower sand that was then placed on the body of a sick person or on a corpse. On the one hand, it was thought to be effective in healing, while on the other it was thought to assure birth in the Pure Land (Sukhāvatī).

Although it is beyond the scope of Unno’s project, his work does raise an important issue for the study of Buddhism in English. That issue is the way in which the term “devotion” is employed. Like many other categories whose origins lie in the history of the Western religious tradition, devotion has been raised to the status of a universal category, one that often seems to be treated as if it were intuitively obvious and can be applied to all religions. The question that I believe needs to be raised is: what happens to our representation of any form of Buddhism when it is described as devotional? What exactly does this mean in a Buddhist context, and how can we as scholars avoid introducing misleading connotations?

What is called devotion in a Buddhist context seems to be neither the ancient Roman practice of dedicating an individual to a destructive deity nor “withdrawal from worldly concerns in order to contemplate divinity” (The Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion, s.v. “devotion”). Rather than attempting to define devotion, the strategy of both the subsequent article on “devotion (Buddhism)” and of The Encyclopedia of Religion, 2nd ed., seems to be one of not excluding anything religious that has an emotional component.

If we turn to the Indic origins of Buddhism, is devotion being used as a cover term for pūja, or for bhakti—two categories that themselves seem to be distinguished rather than identified by the Indic tradition itself? While certainly the practice of votive offerings as part of liturgical practice, that is, pūja, is found throughout Buddhism, this does not seem to be what is meant when some forms of Buddhism such as Pure Land are characterized as “devotional.” Nor would it seem that the practices
associated with bhakti, such as treating a statue of a deity as if it were the living presence (requiring waking in the morning, feeding, dressing, and amusement), can reasonably be ascribed to what is usually called devotional Buddhism.

Unno’s work is highly recommended not only for the historian of Buddhism working in East Asia, but also for the comparative philosopher interested in the intellectual grounding of religious practice. It is also worth noting that Unno’s writing style is quite accessible, and that the work has been priced in a range appropriate for classroom use.