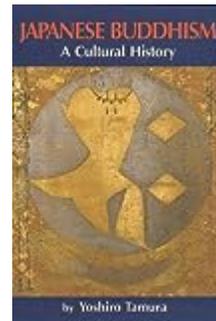




Yoshiro Tamura. *Japanese Buddhism: A Cultural History.* Tokyo: Kosei Publishing, 2000. 232 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-4-333-01684-6.



Reviewed by Stephen Heine (Florida International University)

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This book is a recent English translation of a work by Yoshiro Tamura originally published in Japan in the late 1960s. Tamura, who died in 1989, was in his era one of the most prominent scholars of Japanese Buddhist studies who was probably best known for his major study of “New” Kamakura era Buddhist figures, including Shinran, Dougen, and Nichiren. In that book Tamura executed a very sophisticated textual analysis of the often overt but sometimes subtle distinctions in doctrinal positions of the leading Kamakura Buddhist thinkers in their respective appropriations of Tendai original enlightenment thought (*hongaku shisou*), which was a dominant ideology and major influence on those who may have departed from or criticized its contents. Tamura’s approach to Buddhist studies, with its emphasis on analyzing the textual tradition, has perhaps been superseded for many scholars by the approaches of such figures as Kuroda Toshio, Amino Yoshihiko, and Sasaki Kaoru, who have examined medieval Buddhism from a social-historical perspective. Also, some of Tamura’s other writings may be questioned for espousing a standpoint that could be associated with *nihonjinron* (Japanese exceptionalism) theory by highlighting the distinctiveness of Buddhist practices in the context of Japanese cultural tradition.

A focus in the current book on Japanese cultural

uniqueness for understanding Buddhism in Japan seems indicated by the subtitle and back-cover copy, which refers to the way “Japan’s Buddhism and the nation’s cultural matrix are so inextricably linked that it is impossible to explicate the one without understanding the other.” However, the work itself does not really delve into *nihonjinron* territory, but rather offers a conventional historical approach, with some exceptions, including chapter 4 on “The Japanese Response,” which discusses Japanese poetic expressions of Buddhist doctrine.

The contents of the book were originally published in a Kosei monthly magazine under the title “Hyakuman Nin no Bukkyou-shi” (“A History of Japanese Buddhism for a Million Readers”) and then in book form by Kadokawa Shoten under the title *Nihon Bukkyou-shi Nyuumon* (*An Introductory History of Japanese Buddhism*). Since the original publication date was thirty-five years ago, and the book does not represent cutting-edge scholarship at this point, it can best be evaluated for its possible usefulness as a general survey in the classroom. The key question is whether this would make ideal required reading for an advanced undergraduate course on Japanese Buddhism.

The book’s main advantage is also its weakness, that is, the attempt to cover over fifteen hundred years and every major period in a little over two hundred pages.

On the one hand, all of the major schools and thinkers are introduced, ranging from pre-Nara trends through the formation of classical and medieval sects as well as early modern socio-political conditions to contemporary new religious movements. The book is a reliable reference guide which offers a snapshot of important events, leading figures, and doctrinal themes, in a way that is evenhanded and objective, including the explanation of Nichirenist new movements such as Risshou Kousei-kai. For that reason it can be highly recommended.

On a close reading, however, the deficiency of this approach becomes clear. For example, chapter 3, dealing with the development of early Buddhist temples in Japan, tries to show a progression from Asuka-dera through Shiteenou-ji and Houryuu-ji to Yakushi-ji temple, but the discussion in the narrative does not sufficiently flesh out

what the diagram on page 41 is trying to illustrate about unfolding trends in iconography and scriptural exegetical studies.

Also, the sections on such topics as Eizon and the revival of the Ritsu school during the Kamakura era and the role of the *danka* system in the Tokugawa era are a bit confusing and misleading in their brevity. In chapter 8, "The Founders of Kamakura Buddhism" refers to a "definite philosophical development" between the teachings of Hounen, Nounin, and Eisai in the late-twelfth century and the thirteenth-century founders of new Buddhist sects (p. 93), but this key point is never clearly explained. Nevertheless, keeping these limitations in mind, *Japanese Buddhism* should make a significant contribution to much-needed instructional materials in the field.

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