

*Engaged Buddhism in Japan, Volume 1: An Engaged Buddhist History of Japan from the Ancient to the Modern.* By Jonathan S. Watts. Manotick, Ontario: Sumeru Press, 2023. 336 pages. Paperback. ISBN-13: 978-1-896559-91-9.

*Engaged Buddhism in Japan, Volume 2: A New Socially Engaged Buddhism in 21st Century Japan; From Intimate Care to Social Ethics.* By Jonathan S. Watts. Manotick, Ontario: Sumeru Press, 2023. 362 pages. Paperback. ISBN-13: 978-1-896559-92-6.

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The activities of socially engaged Buddhists are experiencing a resurgence of discussion in the West. But Anglophone authors have often sidelined Japan in favor of Southeast Asian, Taiwanese, and American actors. This is largely true of scholars who are not themselves Japan specialists, and certainly true for most commentators in the engaged Buddhist practitioner community.<sup>1</sup> For example, the most recent major work in the field, Paul Fuller's *An Introduction to Engaged Buddhism*, contains less than a page's worth of information about Japan; this otherwise excellent introductory text doesn't even mention the existence of Pure Land Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> This seems to indicate that Japan is not considered a fit subject for attention by scholars of Buddhist social engagement who don't already focus their broader research agenda on Japan.<sup>3</sup> Thankfully, the publication of Jonathan Watts's large and vital two-volume set, *Engaged Buddhism in Japan*, provides a major corrective to this myopic tendency. Watts's work is a godsend for those who work on Buddhist social engagement, whether in Japan or elsewhere, revealing a wide range of social engagement occurring in Japan, on many issues, with close attention to the historical and contemporary contexts.

Watts is one of the longstanding stalwarts of Japanese engaged Buddhist research. In edited volumes such as *This Precious Life: Buddhist Tsunami Relief and Anti-Nuclear Activism in Post 3/11 Japan* (2012), *Buddhist Care for the Dying and Bereaved* (2012), and *Lotus in the Nuclear Sea: Fukushima and the Promise of Buddhism in the Nuclear Age* (2013), as well as in his activity with the Japan Network of Engaged Buddhists and chaplaincy teaching at Keio University, Watts has been one of the most active voices attempting to foster engaged Buddhist theory in Japan and shepherd information about Japanese Buddhist social engagement to Westerners. Thus, *Engaged Buddhism in*

<sup>1</sup> As Alexander Hsu (2022) and others have noted, there is significant overlap between the fully academic and committed practitioner circles of engaged Buddhist practice and research.

<sup>2</sup> Fuller 2022. Pure Land is the most common type of Japanese Buddhism, with numerous specific engaged Buddhist organizations and figures documented in Watts's *Engaged Buddhism in Japan*.

<sup>3</sup> Fuller actually draws occasionally from Watts's coedited volume (Watts and Tomatsu 2012) on dying, but never from the portions by Japanese authors or about Japanese issues. See, for example, Fuller 2022, p. 33.

*Japan* reads like the crowning work of a scholar who has spent long years thinking and talking about how to conceptualize social engagement inclinations in Japan's particular society.

Volume 1 is subtitled "An Engaged Buddhist History of Japan from the Ancient to the Modern," not "a History of Engaged Buddhism of Japan from the Ancient to the Modern." The distinction is important because while the book is heavily researched, scholarly in tone and perspective, and scrupulous about accuracy and fair representation, it is not an act of disinterested scholarship. Watts writes as an engaged Buddhist thinker who has been shoulder to shoulder with other activists in their community work and Dharmic theorizing. Thus, while volume 1 is about explaining Japanese Buddhist history in relation to Japanese society, it is a methodical chronicle of the spread and evolution of Buddhism with a critical lens as to whether Buddhism was challenging or capitulating to state power and cultural conservatism. As Watts readily states, "An essential question for this book is: As a 'religion' focused on the alleviation of suffering (*dukkha*), its First Noble Truth, can Buddhism offer any means to overcome [the] critical challenges facing Japan today?" (vol. 1, p. 11).

The first volume mainly consists of three chronological parts, looking in turn at Buddhism up to and through the Tokugawa 徳川 period (1603–1868), the Meiji 明治 period (1868–1912) through the Pacific War era, and the postwar decades to the end of the twentieth-century. Watts takes as a framework the idea of axial religious systems of thought. These forms of religion imagine a separation between the transcendental and mundane worlds that must be bridged to create a reformed individual and society that are in better accord with the divine order. This stance produced universal ethics and critical positionalities vis-à-vis the received social order in contrast to orientations toward unreflexive in-group chauvinism that define ethics in terms of in-group loyalty and benefit to the group. For Watts, Japanese Buddhist history is a struggle of the axial potentiality of Buddhism in tension with group-oriented autochthonous ethics that continually wear away the social transformativeness latent in Buddhist insight. His inquiry and program boil down to:

Can Buddhism as a religious system—or more fundamentally, a mode of thought and way of life—provide the universal and axial modes of praxis (which are at the same time indigenous after 1,500 years of historical development within the country) to support Japan to face its ongoing confrontation with modernity and globalization as well as its present social crises? For Buddhism to offer such resources, a critical reconstruction of its history along such axial contours is essential, for as we will see, Buddhist history, like the history of so many other religions, is rife with de-axial regressions into ethno-centric, clannish nationalism (vol. 1, p. 24).

This is the guiding concern as he retells Japanese Buddhist history, mirroring in some ways the critical social history of Watts's engaged Buddhist philosophical peers such as David Loy in *A Buddhist History of the West: Studies in Lack* (2002).

In Watts's analysis, Buddhism was primarily welded to clan values or state co-option in the earlier centuries of its development. The first truly revolutionary figure in Japanese Buddhism was the Pure Land monk Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212), whose *nenbutsu* 念仏 teachings empowered the common people in a way that was deeply threatening to the repressive entrenched social order (a social order thoroughly supported by the Buddhist mainstream). This revolutionary spirit was also taken up by Hōnen's disciple Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1263) and after some generations produced significant peasant revolts that rocked medieval Japan. Watts also discusses revolutionary aspects of the teachings of Dōgen 道元 (1200–1253) and Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282). Following these revolutionary sparks, he charts how they were overwhelmed and neutered in the course of Japanese history, eventually resulting in a Buddhist establishment that was simultaneously powerful and weak—able to amass great fortune and propagate itself over centuries while losing any substantial leverage over the direction of society and eventually regressing into a funeral business. This description may make Watts's work sound too trite: actually, he is closely attentive to how power was used by and against various Buddhist groups. Such power ultimately—but not in a preordained, teleological manner—shaped Buddhist institutions into collaborators rather than threats to dominant power hierarchies. Watts discusses various Pure Land, Zen 禪, and Nichiren intellectuals who promoted axial and social reformist views in the prewar period, most of whom will be unfamiliar to many engaged Buddhist scholars.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, this first wave of recognizably engaged Buddhists (though not known by that term, which would be anachronistic) were unable to prevent the alliance of Buddhism and militarism that crystallized in the wartime support of the major Buddhist denominations.<sup>5</sup>

Arguably the strongest parts of volume 1 are the third section and the conclusion, where Watts provides a detailed consideration of postwar Japan decade by decade through the 1990s. Here he spends the same amount of space on approximately fifty years that he spends on over one thousand years in the first section. The result is the richest, most nuanced, and most reliable material in the book, covering many specific thinkers and movements in their evolving social contexts. Major issues during this time include labor, the legacy of militarism, and social discrimination. Watts critiques the positions of Sōka Gakkai 創価学会 (held up uncritically by some well-known

<sup>4</sup> Information about some of these figures is available in a few works in English—such as James Mark Shields's *Against Harmony* (2017)—but is rarely cited by major Anglophone scholars of social engagement who don't already focus on Japan.

<sup>5</sup> None of this will be especially surprising to scholars of Japan, but much of Watts's intended audience is engaged Buddhists both within and beyond Japan.

engaged Buddhist scholars), demonstrates the partial and ambivalent actions of many of the major denominations, and describes the work of various individuals toward a more axial mode of universally compassionate socially-engaged Buddhism.

All of this is significantly useful. For the scholar who is interested in Buddhist social engagement but relatively unfamiliar with the details of Japan's history or the complexity of Japanese Buddhism, volume 1 is a gift that will provide a good handle on both history and issues. For the scholar of Japan, it perhaps has less direct utility but does significant work in offering a single source that collects an abundance of relevant data in a handy reference volume, and provides a narrative intellectual history that can be used as theory or foil (depending on one's own interpretations of Japanese history) in a generative manner for stimulating further thought and work.

All of that said, it is volume 2 that should be required reading for all scholars who purport to focus on Buddhist social engagement. Focusing squarely on the twenty-first century (with reference to later twentieth century antecedents as necessary), Watts provides a detailed tour through most of the socially engaged Buddhist activity of contemporary Japan. Much of this information has not been previously available in languages other than Japanese; even where it has been available (such as, in some cases, Watts's edited volumes) it has typically been under-cited, and volume 2 brings it all together in an easily accessed resource that is impressively comprehensive.

The guiding concept of volume 2 is "disconnected society" (*muen shakai* 無縁社会)—how Japan arrived at its present social ills due to fragmented interpersonal bonds and a weak social covenant (especially as manifested in deficiencies in government social programs and policies)—and how priests are working to apply Buddhism as a solution for one or more of the described problems. Watts also wants Japanese engaged Buddhism to go further than social welfare activities to provide analysis of, and work on, the larger structural forces that drive social injustice and suffering; thus, this gets particular attention. Generally speaking, Watts feels Japanese Buddhist social theory (formal or implied) has been weak in this area, especially when compared to later twentieth century engaged Buddhist thinking produced in areas like Southeast Asia. He therefore engages in critique while highlighting trends that evidence the emergence of this deeper engaged Buddhist reasoning.

The introduction is a compelling initial description and analysis of social ills related to disconnectedness such as suicide, bullying, underemployment, homelessness, and poverty alongside what Watts (and many others) sees as the marginalized role of most Buddhist clerics and denominations as mere providers of funerary services. Five chapters follow that extend this analysis by providing close attention to specific issues. Chapter 1 expands on the critique of funeral Buddhism as it observes how various Buddhists (especially from the Pure Land tradition) have worked to bring conversations about the realities of dying, care for the ailing, and hospice practices into the

mainstream. As he notes, “the Vihara movement as led principally by the priests of the Jodo Shin denomination in Japan offers a fascinating foil to the present Buddhist hospice care movement in the United States led by numerous prominent American Zen teachers. . . . The emphasis here [in the Vihara movement] is less on the attainments of meditation and more on the warmth of compassion” (vol. 2, p. 66).<sup>6</sup> Important work by Nichiren and Zen priests is also given attention.

Chapter 2 continues this examination by focusing on suicide prevention. An interesting comparison is provided of Pure Land and Zen priests who employ somewhat different tactics in their suicide prevention activities, based ultimately in their respective “other power” (*tariki* 他力) or “self-power” (*jiiriki* 自力) religious orientations. Chapter 3 looks at disaster relief and the rise of Buddhist chaplaincy. Not surprisingly, the March 11, 2011, triple disaster features prominently here, though the primary focus of this chapter is the tsunami and the general displacement experienced by huge numbers of people—the especially nuclear aspects of the disaster are mostly saved for chapter 5. Chapter 3 has the most overlap with Watts’s previous publications, but again does the useful work of pulling disparate sources into a single, coherent reference volume where nonspecialists can access and understand the range and depth of Japanese Buddhist activity in this area. There is also plenty of information presented for the first time in English.

Chapter 4 looks at a range of issues relating to social fragmentation: rural decline, the plight of migrant workers, persistent poverty, and the realities of homelessness in Japan. Watts perceives these issues as the locus of some of the most cutting-edge Buddhist critique. As usual, he spends significant time explaining the historical, social, political, and cultural forces and developments that contributed to the challenges Japan faces today. These are many, but neoliberal economic reform (or deformation, if one prefers) is highlighted as a particular driver of widespread misery. As usual, Buddhist responses from a variety of denominations are discussed, with the Jōdoshū-originating Hitosaji ひとさじの会 (One Spoon Association) group, comprised of priests working among the urban unhoused population, given as an especially compelling case.

As mentioned, chapter 5 looks squarely at the nuclear issue (which also receives tangential attention in chapters 3 and 4). This is another place with some significant overlap with Watts’s earlier work, and the prominence of the contemporary Jōdoshū priest Ōkōchi Hidehito 大河内秀人 will not be surprising to researchers who follow these topics. The confidence and depth with which Watts is able to explore the history of this issue due to his long familiarity with it is apparent throughout this chapter. This is also the chapter where environmental issues receive their greatest attention.

<sup>6</sup> The Vihara movement originated in the mid-1980s with a focus on Buddhist care for the terminally ill and their families. By the 1990s, Vihara units began to be established in Japanese hospitals.

In Watts's analysis, nuclear and other environmental concerns are a site of productive Japanese Buddhist social critique and the creation of alternative Buddhist forms of social development that have greater potentiality for individual wellbeing and society-level sustainability.

Volume 2 closes with an afterword that focuses especially on gender issues—a matter of rather dismal progress in Japanese society (and Japanese Buddhism specifically). Watts also continues his discussion of sustainability issues, noting critically how large Buddhist denominations are often naively involved in sustainability fads without deeper commitment to genuine self-reflection and transformation.

In all, Watts's work is truly impressive and will be a key resource for the current and next generation of scholars on Buddhist social engagement. As with all works, there are also areas that deserve some critique. Leaving aside whether any given reader is persuaded by Watts's analyses, there are three primary weaknesses or omissions in this two-volume set. First is the lack of sufficient indexing: volume 1 has a serviceable index, but volume 2 has no index, and there is no overall index that references both volumes. This is a significant deficiency that makes the seven hundred pages of text—thick with names and movements many readers will be unfamiliar with—less useful as a reference. Even this reviewer, who is more acquainted than many readers with the people and issues covered in *Engaged Buddhism in Japan*, was often at a loss over how exactly a figure under discussion related to matters in the first book or earlier sections of volume 2. Any future second edition will need to plug this major gap.

A second omission is the lack of attention to LGBTQ+ issues, which receive a total of two pages of coverage (in the afterword of volume 2). While acknowledging the Herculean efforts that have gone into considering a very wide range of issues, and granting that no work (no matter how large) can truly cover all facets of a topic as big as Buddhist social engagement, the relatively paltry space given to LGBTQ+ activities is an unfortunate missed opportunity. Finally, and perhaps ironically, Watts undersells his own involvement in Japanese Buddhist social engagement initiatives. For decades, he has been a persistent participant, partner, and/or insider of many of the movements he chronicles in *Engaged Buddhism in Japan*. Yet his own involvement is generally unnoted in the main body of the text, even when he discusses projects that he was an organizer of or primary participant in. It would be appropriate to include more overt attention to the author's own activities and positionality—the history of engaged Buddhism in Japan is certainly not a story about Jonathan Watts, but Watts is a part of that story.

These critiques should not detract from the major achievement that these volumes represent. Going forward, no scholar or serious practitioner-thinker of the global engaged Buddhist movement will be able to ignore Watts's *Engaged Buddhism in Japan*. No other single resource comes close to providing the wealth of information and coverage that is found within; as such, it is a sourcebook that invites frequent return to

dive into the riches that Watts has assembled. It will undoubtedly provoke substantial discussion within Japan, and increased research activity within and beyond Japan, for many years to come.

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*The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy*. Edited by Bret W. Davis. Oxford University Press. 2020. xxv + 814 pages. Hardcover. ISBN-13: 978-0-19-994572-6.

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*The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy*, skillfully and thoughtfully edited by Bret W. Davis, is an indispensable volume for anyone with a serious interest in the accomplishments and possibilities of “Japanese philosophy.” Davis brings an impressive background to the project, including a rigorous training in Western philosophy (primarily the Continental tradition), a deep immersion in both the Japanese language and its attendant philosophical culture, including study at Kyoto University, and extensive Zen 禅 training in a Japanese monastery.

Despite the fact that this is a handbook to “Japanese philosophy,” the volume does not assume that it is obvious to demarcate philosophy with the adjective “Japanese.” If it were to simply denote philosophy as it is currently practiced in Japan—a practice which itself has been shaped by the importation of European university practices and disciplines—then there are many Japanese scholars, professors, and students who study the same kind of European and European-inspired figures and themes that are researched and advanced all over the world under the disciplinary rubric of “philoso-