



Mark Unno. *Shingon Refractions: Myoe and the Mantra of Light*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2004. 320 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86171-390-5.



Reviewed by James L. Ford

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Myōe and the Mantra of Light

Among the Nara Buddhist scholar monks of the early medieval period, Myōe (1173-1232) is without question the most well known and academically studied. Prior to the publication of this study by Mark Unno, Myōe had already been the focus of three monographs and one dissertation in English, at least ten book-length studies in Japanese, and hundreds of journal articles. Most of these studies have focused primarily on one of three dimensions of Myōe's life: his Kegon doctrinal reform efforts, his dream diaries, and his dispute with Hōnen, the founder of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan. Mark Unno takes a decidedly different slant that sheds new light not just on Myōe's life, but also on the widely practiced but little studied esoteric ritual known as the Mantra of Light (J. *Kōmyō Shingon*) and the nature of Buddhism during the early medieval period.

The book is divided into two parts. The first, six chapters in all, provides an intellectual and cultural history of the Mantra of Light and Myōe's role in developing and promoting it. Part 2 includes annotated translations of six texts on the Mantra of Light. Four are authored by Myōe and the remaining two are records of his state-

ments assembled by disciples. Representing a variety of genres—daily temple schedules, doctrinal commentaries, and lectures—these translations are by and large the first available on this central Buddhist practice. As such, they shed new light on the evolution of this popular practice and Myōe's key role in that evolution.

Chapter 1 of part 1 traces the history of textual sources and mantra practice from India to Japan. Unno places Myōe at the center of this historical narrative. Chapter 2 explores Myōe's efforts to establish the legitimacy and efficacy of the practice. Chapter 3 elucidates Myōe's understanding of the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness and draws intriguing parallels with the Chinese Daoist master Zhuangzi. Chapter 4 explores the role of the Mantra of Light in Myōe's vision of monastic practice. Chapter 5 examines the tension between the strict boundaries of monastic ritual practice and the "boundarylessness," particularly for women, of the mantra practice. Finally, chapter 6 offers a number of concluding insights.

Throughout this study, Unno highlights elements of Myōe's biography that have been little studied and ob-

scured due perhaps to a latent tension with the traditional sectarian approach to medieval Japanese Buddhism. For example, after receiving the monastic precepts at the ordination platform at Tōdaiji, head temple of the Kegon school, Myōe was subsequently ordained into the Shin-gon lineage. The fact that Myōe is most often associated with the Kegon school is a function of the often anachronistic imposition of contemporary sectarian identity onto a period when this was not a critical feature of Japanese Buddhism. Myōe served the latter half of his career as the abbot of Kōzanji, a temple he revived and which was for a long time affiliated with the Kegon school and Tōdaiji. Kegon is generally classified as part of the *exoteric* branch of Buddhism. Despite the fact that Kōzanji was established as a temple for the training of Kegon monks, however, Myōe devoted the last decade of his life to the Mantra of Light, a decidedly *esoteric* practice. Through a penetrating analysis of the ten works authored by Myōe on the Mantra of Light, in addition to his proselytizing efforts, Unno pegs Myōe as *the* critical figure in its development and popularization. Even today, the Mantra of Light is one of the most widely practiced in Japan. As Unno writes, “Myōe’s contributions should be considered on their own terms; when understood in this way, the mantra can be seen as reflective of his own creative engagement with Buddhism and a lens through which to view the many forces that shaped the Buddhism of the time” (p. 9).

The Mantra of Light derives from a number of Mahāyāna sūtras that trace back to Indian sources such as, in particular, the *Sūtra of the Mantra of Divine Transformation of the Unfailing Rope Snare* (S: *Amoghapaśavikrīṇita-mantra Sūtra*; Ch: *Bukong zhuan-suo shenbian zhenyan jing*). The central deities of the mantra are Mahāvairocana and Fukūkenjaku Kannon (Bodhisattva of Compassion of the Unfailing Rope Snare; Skt. *Amoghapāśa Avalokiteśvara*). This sūtra was brought to Japan initially by Kūkai and its earliest known use dates to the latter part of the ninth century. It did not see wide usage, however, until the eleventh century. Indeed, Kūkai, the “father” of esotericism in Japan, never himself employed the Mantra of Light practice. According to the *Mantra of Divine Transformation Sūtra*, for one who chants the mantra with a sincere and clear mind, Vairocana Buddha will rid the practitioner of ignorance and delusion. A common practice, developed primarily in the wake of Myōe’s efforts, entailed sprinkling sand blessed by the mantra over a corpse or burial site in order to cleanse the deceased of any negative karmic residue, thus facilitating birth into a variety of Buddha realms.

Because the rite was claimed to aid those seeking birth in Amitābha’s Pure Land, in particular, it came to be seen as a supplemental practice to *nenbutsu* recitation. In addition to being invoked at funeral ceremonies, the sand was also used to cure illness.

Myōe promoted the Mantra of Light as a superior means of achieving birth in Amida’s Pure Land in opposition to the increasingly popular *nenbutsu* recitation promoted by Hōnen and his followers (pp. 32-35). More significantly perhaps, Myōe emphasized the universal “efficacy of the sand for the living and the dead, lay and ordained, men and women” (p. 40). He thus played a crucial role in the popularization of the Mantra of Light, extending the benefits to practitioners and devotees of all social and religious levels through the use of sand. Even today, as previously noted, it remains one of the most important and widely practiced mantras in Japan. Moreover, the use of sand, advocated by Myōe in particular, became integral to its application and was incorporated into the contemporary practices of other schools such as Zen and Tendai (p. 41). Myōe also highlighted the practice as an example of the complementarity of exoteric and esoteric teachings, proclaiming that the “profundity of the profound dharma is constant. The Shingon is profound because it expounds the shallow as profound” (p. 59). In short, Myōe’s adoption and popular promotion of the Mantra of Light illustrates the practical integration of esotericism into Kegon monastic practice.

Unno contends that it was critical for Myōe to explain, doctrinally, how the sand, empowered through esoteric ritual, could effect a dead person’s salvation, and, furthermore, how this soteriological power was sustained over time well after the ritual’s performance. In chapter 3, Unno endeavors to address these questions by deciphering Myōe’s use of the doctrines of emptiness and two truths in his theoretical framework. In particular, he concentrates on Myōe’s *Recommending Faith in the Sand of the Mantra of Light* (*Kōmyō Shingon dosha kanjin ki*), an introductory text written for a lay or novice audience that links faith in the Mantra of Light to the twofold truths and doctrine of emptiness. In an effort to explicate the meaning of this text, Unno compares the views of Myōe to those found in the Daoist classic *Zhuangzi*. From Myōe, he analyzes a little studied passage about mushrooms found in *Recommending Faith* and from *Zhuangzi*, he explores the famous passage of Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly. Unno’s stated intent is to shift the focus of comparison away from Hōnen, a preoccupation within many studies of Myōe. In particular, Myōe’s practice of the Mantra of Light is often contrasted with Hōnen’s al-

legiance to *nenbutsu* recitation and singular devotion to Amida. Unno rightly notes that this fixation is rooted largely in the later prominence of Hōnen as founder of the Pure Land sect in Japan, which anachronistically distorts the significance of the tension between these figures.

While I fully concur with Unno's critique of the over-emphasis of Hōnen in interpretations of Myōe, the choice of *Zhuangzi* is curious. Although it makes for interesting comparative reflection, it is not entirely clear how the similarities (e.g., skepticism of language and reason to grasp ultimate reality) or differences (e.g., notions of selfhood, time, moral destiny, and practices) help illuminate Myōe's perspective that is rooted in a very different social, historical, and cultural context. If the intent is to understand the distinctiveness of Myōe's ideas on emptiness and the two truths as they relate to faith in the Mantra of Light, it would seem much more fruitful to compare his views to those of a representative of the Tendai school, the dominant ideology of the day, as opposed to those of a Chinese mystic who lived over 1500 years earlier. Despite this reservation, Unno does an excellent job of bridging the divide between Myōe's philosophy and his vision of how to live in the everyday world.

This volume contributes to a growing collection of scholarship that corrects long-standing biases and misperceptions about the nature of Buddhism during the early medieval period. First, it reveals the hazards of imposing a sectarian interpretive framework on many prominent Nara monks of the period. Unno clearly shows that Myōe was just as rooted in the Shingon tradition—perhaps more so in the latter years of his life—than the Kegon school with which he is so often associated. Second and as already noted, an over-emphasis on the Pure Land teachings of Hōnen and Shinran too often distorts interpretations of events within established Buddhism of the period. More often than not, the efforts, doctrinal and otherwise, of monks like Myōe, Jōkei, Jien, Eison, Ninshō, Ryōhen, and others are seen as responses to the radical teachings of Hōnen when the dominant Tendai school or the general ethos of the period

are the more relevant contextual factors. It is in this respect that *Zhuangzi* is probably not the most revealing lens for exploring the doctrinal underpinnings of the Mantra of Light's ritual efficacy from Myōe's perspective. Third, the prominent tendency to characterize established Buddhism of the late Heian and early Kamakura period as "aristocratic," as opposed to the "popular and democratic" efforts of the "new" Kamakura founders, obscures the popular (a term I use reluctantly) efforts of monks like Myōe, Jōkei and Eison. In many ways, these luminaries of the established schools in Nara seemed just as concerned with making their teachings and Buddhist salvation accessible to the general population as Hōnen, Shinran, or Eisai. To the noteworthy extent that Unno's study of Myōe contributes to this trend in recent scholarship, it further problematizes the simplistic divide between "new" Kamakura Buddhism and "old" established Buddhism of the early medieval period. Finally, Unno's study underscores the strengths and weaknesses of Kuroda Toshio's theory on the crucial role of a combinatory exoteric and esoteric ideology—widely known as the "exoteric-esoteric system" (*kenmitsu taisei*)—as the foundation of the social, religious, and political *episteme* of the medieval period. Myōe, a prominent scholar-monk generally linked to the "exoteric" Kegon school, can now be properly seen as a prime example of Kuroda's thesis. On the other hand, Myōe is distinctive insofar as his vision problematizes the somewhat monolithic and broad-brushed depiction of the *kenmitsu* system presented by Kuroda. Exoteric and esoteric teachings and practices were not reconciled uniformly by the competing voices within established Buddhism.

For all of these reasons, in addition to its thorough examination of the little studied Mantra of Light in pre-modern Japan, this is a worthwhile read for all students of Japanese religion and culture. It is indeed surprising, given the prominence of the Mantra of Light in Japanese religious history, that this is the first monograph published on the topic. Unno is to be commended for rescuing this important ritual from obscurity. One hopes that he will at some point fulfill his plan to publish a second volume on the development of the practice after Myōe.

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