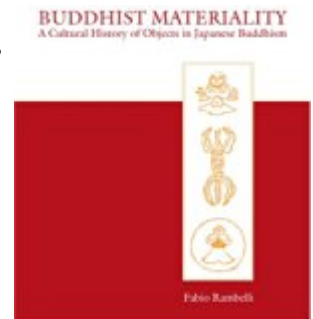


Fabio Rambelli. *Buddhist Materiality: A Cultural History of Objects in Japanese Buddhism.* Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007. xiv + 394 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-5682-2.



Reviewed by Pamela Winfield

Published on H-Buddhism (July, 2010)

Commissioned by Gereon Kopf (Luther College)

Fabio Rambelli has long been known in the field of Japanese Buddhist studies for his scholarship on Shintō-Buddhist syncretism and Shingon semiotics and secrecy. He now brings these areas of expertise to bear on a sweeping analysis of the philosophical underpinnings and real-world ramifications of the Buddhist views of objects. In *Buddhist Materiality*, Rambelli specifically focuses on the tangible stuff of the material universe that so often gets overlooked by Buddhist discourses on meditation and intangible states of mind. He considers not only the obvious topics of ritual implements and icons but also some not so obvious topics that trigger methodological innovations and insights. These include the consideration of scriptures as performance objects and not just subjects of hermeneutical exegesis; trees as embodiments of Buddha-nature and not just Shintō animism with all its nativist and “vague environmental” associations; and professional tools as religious commodities that along with other inanimate objects directly benefited temple economies through

special deconsecration, disposal, and memorial rites (*kuyō*) (p. 3).

The common leitmotif running through Rambelli’s wide-ranging and historically broad argument is the primacy of the esoteric doctrine of the Buddha-nature of insentients (*sōmoku jōbutsu*). This doctrine literally alludes to the enlightenment of plants (*sōmoku*, metonymic for all of nature and the material world), and provides the ideological basis for Buddhist institutions to appropriate both the means and materials necessary for controlling commodities in a proto-capitalist Japan. Specifically, this doctrine allowed temples to control forests and the trees that were essential to temple construction, carved icons, and paper production for sutras and paintings. It also helped them control the creation, use, and disuse of professional tools that housed sacred presences and ritual implements that constituted three-dimensional mandala altars. By focusing on the ideology of objects in this way, Rambelli is able to analyze the “creation of order and of power relations in

society” from an innovative and illuminating starting point (p. 9).

Chapter 1, “The Buddhist Philosophy of Objects and the Status of Inanimate Entities,” provides a well-documented survey of Buddhist thought addressing the question of mind in the things of the world. Rambelli pays particular attention to Shingon and Tendai doctrines emphasizing non-dualism between sentient and non-sentient beings, and examines some of the Nō plays, popular texts, and ritual practices that point to the widespread belief in the Buddha-nature of the natural world. In chapter 2, “The Buddhist System of Objects,” Rambelli takes stock of the enormous array of objects involved in Buddhist material culture, from robes, ritual implements, and altar adornments (*shōgon*) to funerary objects, amulets, scripture accessories, initiation certificates, paintings, Buddha statues, and master portraits. Rambelli invokes Jean Baudrillard’s “nostalgia for origins” when discussing relics and notes the ambivalent status of objects, which can function positively as expedient means (*upāya*) or negatively as deluded hindrances to enlightenment (p. 62).

The following chapter, “The Materiality and Performativity of Sacred Texts,” explores the phenomena of sutra production, devotional recitation, and reproduction (copying) for the sole purpose of merit transfer, not doctrinal comprehension. These activities and other modes of non-hermeneutic interaction assigned performative, not informative, value to texts. They were consequently elevated to the status of magical talismans or relics that served as empowering agents and artifacts of enlightenment.

Chapter 4, “The Cultural Imagination of Trees and the Environment,” achieves two objectives. On the one hand, it historically contextualizes the notion of nature (*shizen*) and deconstructs Japan’s supposed love for it as nativist and Orientalist fabrications. On the other hand, the chapter also acknowledges the rich Buddhist discourse about

the sacredness of trees, which, Rambelli argues, served “to sacralize Buddhist statues and sacred places and to turn [tree-dwelling] *kami* into Buddhas (literally and materially)” (p. 152). This latter point significantly revises our understanding of the syncretic *honji suijaku* system equating the “original ground” (*honji*) of the Buddhas with the “local trace” (*suijaku*) of the *kami*, and rather recasts it as a contested power play for resources as Buddhists established their political, socioeconomic, and ideological authority over Shintō by constructing and controlling sacred space.

In chapter 5, “Tools and Labor as Mediators between the Sacred and the Profane,” Rambelli extends the discussion of Shintō-Buddhist syncretism to the everyday realm of objects in late medieval and early modern Japan. He considers the foundation legends of professional guilds involving *gongen* (local Shintō manifestations of Buddhist deities), and looks to the myriad ways in which the professional tools, labor activities, and everyday practices of various occupations were and still are being sacralized in Japan. The next chapter, “Objects, Ritual, Tradition: Memorial Services (*Kuyō*) for Inanimate Objects,” explains how Buddhist institutions again furthered their own influence and economic interests by inventing rituals for disposing of everyday yet sacred objects (needles, dolls, *fude* [calligraphy brushes], etc.). In the context of an increasingly commercialized society, in a country with limited space for storing expired commodities, with a set of doctrines on impermanence, detachment from desire-driven acquisitions, and a post-Meiji specialization in handling death rites, Buddhism was able to step in and fulfill an essential social function: that of waste disposal.

Chapter 7, “Buddhist Sacred Commodities and the General Economy,” concludes the study with a rich meditation on material culture and materialism. It offers an alternative way of viewing things—not as commodities and resources to be used but rather as gifts to be freely exchanged (p.

263). This outlook counters Karl Marx's "commodity fetishism" that hides the social relations of production and domination (p. 273). Thanks to Rambelli's impeccable scholarship and engaging prose, the social relations involved in producing a dominant Buddhist culture of objects in Japan have become ever more transparent.

This all being said, however, I believe that Rambelli could have strengthened his argument further if he had expanded his discussion of India's five-element theory to include China's alternative five-element theory that also influenced Buddhist philosophies of form throughout East Asia. The classical Indian list of earth, water, fire, air, and space progressed to evermore subtle substances and privileged the realm of formlessness over form. Esoteric Buddhist thinkers inherited this Indian list, added a sixth element of consciousness, and collapsed its ontological hierarchy so that Buddhahood could be located in this very body (*sokushin jōbutsu*). The Buddhist doctrine of *sōmoku jōbutsu* is but a variation on this theme applied to the enlightenment of plants and other "inanimate" substances. In addition to this Indian line of reasoning, however, what role might the traditional Chinese list of earth, water, fire, wood, and metal have had on the Mahāyāna and especially esoteric Buddhist view of objects? The Chinese combinatory system for making and unmaking the stuff of life also locates the basic building blocks of things on a wholly horizontal plane and envisions salvation as a fully embodied endeavor. Most significantly for Rambelli's project, however, is the fact that the Chinese list adds the essential elements of wood and metal. These are clearly two key components that are relevant to his discussion of *sōmoku* plants and "non-sentients," as well as to his investigation of sacred trees, metal objects, and the laborers directly involved in their production and use (e.g., loggers, carpenters, *shakuhachi* [bamboo flute] players, *busshi* [Buddhist sculptors] working in wood or gilt bronze, swordsmiths, needle makers, mirror polishers, etc.). Rambelli in general is quick to acknowledge

"Tantrism's absorption into Buddhism of non-Buddhist beliefs and practices" and states that "the cultural field of objects was a primary arena of interaction of Buddhism with local cults and traditions and with other imported religious systems such as Confucianism and Daoism" (pp. 14, 260). However, more attention to the specifically Daoist worldview could have buttressed his treatment of such texts as the *Ha jigoku giki* (Ritual instructions on the destruction of Hell, T18). Despite its attributed translation by Subhakarasiṃha (637-735), this influential text was probably composed either in late T'ang China or post-tenth-century Japan and is responsible for shaping Japan's medieval worldview. (p. 21; 277-278). Such considerations could have amplified his analysis to include not only the mandalic mixing of sentient and non-sentient entities but also the Indian and Chinese categories that I suggest may have loosely structured conceptual categories for the substances enumerated in the text. For example, Rambelli translates:

"1. The mountains, the sea, and the earth come from the letter *a*. [EARTH]

2. The rivers and all the water streams come from the syllable *vaṃ*. [WATER]

3. Gold, jade, precious gems, the sun, the moon and the stars, and the light of fire and jewels come from the syllable *raṃ*. [FIRE]

4. *The five cereals, the five fruits, and the blossoming flowers* are produced by the syllable *haṃ*. [AIR / WOOD]

5. Beautiful people perfumed with wonderful fragrances, heavenly longevity, a pretty face, a beautiful aspect, *fortune and wealth* display their glory out of the syllable *khaṃ*. [SPACE / METAL]" (p. 21, non-Sanskrit italics and capitalized elements mine).

It is clear, however, that these five-element theories are but generalized principles and not strict, literal categories (as evidenced by the insertion of seas in the first earth element and gold in

the third fire element), but the application of the Chinese and not just Indian list to Japanese views of objects could have greatly expanded the theme of religious syncretism already present in Rambelli's work.

Another question that Rambelli's investigation raises is the well-known semantic gloss that slides from potentially becoming a Buddha (*jōbutsu*) to ontologically already being one (*zebutsu*). This conundrum, which Dōgen Kigen (1200-53) resolved in his equation of practice=realization, nevertheless poses a particular problem for rocks, stones, and other supposedly inanimate entities. Rambelli here deftly articulates the range of Buddhist voices weighing in on the agency, intentionality and self-willed ability of these bodies to effect their own salvation, and provides numerous examples of individuals propitiating rocks and/or performing memorial rites for felled trees. From philosophical, historical, and ritual studies standpoints, this reading is rich and varied and fills in lacunae of scholarly research that advanced undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate readers alike will find helpful. Moreover the timeliness and relevance of these topics to contemporary concerns, not the least of which is the ecological crisis, will make this volume required reading for both students and scholars in environmental studies, material culture studies, ritual studies, Japanese social history, and Japanese Buddhism (involving especially but not exclusively esoteric history and doctrine [*mikkyō*]). Rambelli has written an altogether seminal study of East Asian Buddhist material culture and its importance to especially Japan's social worlds. This is the stuff of life, and Rambelli handles it expertly.

b

I

D

12

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism>

Citation: Pamela Winfield. Review of Rambelli, Fabio. *Buddhist Materiality: A Cultural History of Objects in Japanese Buddhism*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. July, 2010.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=26312>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.