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A Reflection on Dr. Asuka Sango's  
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In her 2015 book *The Halo of Golden Light: Imperial Authority and Buddhist Ritual in Heian Japan*, Professor Asuka Sango freshly acquainted readers with the dynamic, mutually influential relationships between the medieval Japanese imperial court and its priestly counterparts. Departing from conventional understandings of the medieval period's imperially patronized "state Buddhism," Professor Sango's close, critical analyses of court-based Buddhist rituals, for instance, show the distribution of Heian Buddhist institutional power to be a far more complex phenomenon than merely the result of imperial patronage: indeed, they reveal closer, more symbiotic, and often more tense exchanges of authority between imperial and Buddhist institutions. Very significantly, this politically nuanced reframing also complicates stiff, scholarly paradigms regarding Heian Buddhism's transition into the Kamakura period's "reformist" Buddhist schools.

It was a great pleasure to host Professor Sango at the University of Toronto's newly founded Centre for Buddhist Studies on December 1st

as the second speaker in the University of Toronto and McMaster University's 2016-17 Yehan Numata Lecture Series. Although only recently returned to North America from a research trip in Japan, Professor Sango travelled to us from Carleton College, Minnesota, where she has taught since 2007. While her current research has departed somewhat from the Heian imperial court and its themes of Buddhist ritual and kingship, her Numata lecture, "The Love of Fame and the Desire for Enlightenment: Life of the Scholar Monk in Medieval Japan," gave further range and definition to the complex Buddhist-institutional terrain introduced in *The Halo of Golden Light*. Likewise, its findings brought fresh, critical challenges to some of the established scholarly heuristics regarding Buddhism in Medieval Japan. Drawing examples particularly from the life and writings of the powerful scholar monk Sōshō, Professor Sango showed that the stereotyped, clean distinction between the Heian period's power hungry, courtly scholar monks and the reform-minded renunciant leaders of Kamakura Buddhism is too stiff to accurately describe the complex lives and legacies of many public Buddhist figures of this historical moment.

To open her talk, Professor Sango warned the darkened seminar room that what we were about to see might upset us. The images she projected—from a twelfth century painted scroll—were indeed striking. The first, showing several monks being butchered by large, grotesque hell-beings, represented the Hell of Dissections: a realm of hell reserved for monks who during life killed or dissected animals. The second, representing the Hell of Boiling Excrement, showed monks being gruesomely punished for drinking saké and eating strongly flavoured vegetables. Professor Sango then referred to final, crucial image, representing the Hell of Debates, in which Heian scholar monks were punished for pursuing fame and prestige more fervently than their enlightenment. While she mentioned that the origin and purpose of this scroll are unclear, the possibilities she glossed suggest a variety of contemporary, critical per-

spectives on the conduct and lifestyle of Buddhist monks. For example, while it may have been used by monks during repentance rites (*Bustumyō-e*) or for personal reflection, it may also have been made and displayed in critique of Heian courtly monastic elites, either from a secular source or across sectarian lines. In any case, the scroll's images vividly communicate a degree of severity in its author's appraisal of elite Buddhist actors' lifestyles during this period, particularly regarding the pursuit of worldly achievement.

Traditionally, such images may have contributed to the conventional narrative separating the worldly, fame-hungry scholar monks of later Heian Buddhism from the severely critical, world-renouncing Buddhist reformers of the Kamakura period. As Professor Sango began introducing us to the thirteenth-century monk Sōshō, however, she made it clear that the accuracy of such clean, categorical distinctions between Buddhist identities or lifestyles in late medieval Japan may be limited. While the scholar-monks' love of fame and worldly affairs appears to have been increasingly idealized against during Sōshō's time and beyond, his extremely frank, prolific writings demonstrate that individual monastics led complex lives, often spanning the period's sharply opposed, idealized identity-categories.

To support this argument, Professor Sango led us through a number of components of Sōshō's career and his semi-biographical, publicly circulated vow text, *Kindan akuji gonju zenkon seijō shō*. Having risen to from modest origins to prominence in the imperial court and later to the leadership of Tōdaiji and the Kegon sect, Sōshō on one hand epitomizes the worldly, famous scholar monk—a fact which he appears clearly conscious of. His vow text, however, with its cavalier admissions to drinking saké, having sex, and seeking fame, complicates this impression. Indeed, although it attests strongly to elements of Sōshō's worldly life, the book's purpose is to discourage such behaviours through critical

reflection and the taking of increasingly stringent vows. Throughout his career, Sōshō evidently became at once more endowed with worldly power and fame and more exacting in his discipline, regularly revising his vows to make them more prohibitive. Similarly, as Sōshō gained authority and social status, the vow text cum diary shows him moving more frequently between Tōdaiji and Kasagidera, a remote Maitreya temple at which he was able to live an equal and opposite, reclusive lifestyle, if only for periods at a time.

Elaborating from these materials, Professor Sango showed us the level of troubling ambiguity Sōshō's life introduces when considered against the conventional binary of worldly scholar monk/Kamakura renunciant reformist. Similar to her work in *The Halo of Golden Light*, Sango's discussion of Sōshō here challenges and indeed demands the critical reconsideration of our interpretive, historiographical tools regarding Buddhist monastic life in Medieval Japan—or perhaps even Buddhist lives in general. By closely examining Sōshō's rich, strikingly candid and personal text, Sango was able to show on one hand that Buddhist disciplinary attitudes may themselves have been differently countenanced and felt than surviving materials such as the Hell images lead us to believe, and also that any life, in its natural complexity, tends to freely transgress the boundaries of clear, idealized identity categories. It will be a great pleasure to learn how Sōshō's wonderfully complicated accounts of monastic life fits into Sango's upcoming book project, which—certainly—will bring us to a fresh, expanded appreciation of the lived dynamics of Buddhist scholarship and debate in Medieval Japan.