

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<http://journals.sfu.ca/cjbs/index.php/cjbs/index>

Number 12, 2017

A Report on Dr. Mark Rowe's Talk:
Bikers, Widows, and Bodhisattvas:
Female Priests in Japanese Buddhism
(Japan Foundation Toronto, March 15, 2017)

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On March 15, 2017, a small crowd fills the gallery room at the Japan Foundation in Toronto. The long narrow room is dimly lit beautifully decorated with delicate scrolls showing pictures from Tōdai-ji. The exhibition, *Road of Light and Hope: National Treasures of Tōdai-ji Temple, Nara*, debuts today, but it not the star of the show tonight. Dr. Mark Rowe, from McMaster University, is delivering a talk about his most recent research. In the summer of 2016, Dr. Rowe conducted interviews of 225 non-eminent monks across Japan, and his talk focussed on three ordinary female priests.

To begin the talk, Dr. Rowe adds his own picture to the collection: one of a young person climbing through a hole in a pole, which shares the same dimensions of the great Buddha statue's nostrils. He shows this photo along with a popular saying: *geta* (traditional sandals) and Buddhas are made from the same tree. These remind us of several truths in the world: that famous sites are made from profane materials, profane materials connect us to the sacred, and everyday things can be extraordinary.

Before he introduces us to the priests, Dr. Rowe gives a brief, but informative, introduction to Japanese Buddhism and Buddhist studies. Most scholarship has focussed on the big names in Japanese Buddhist history (Kukai, Honen, Shinran, etc.) when in reality these figures are only the top 1% of monastics. Japanese Buddhist monks can eat, drink and take wives. They primarily deal in death; their primary function is to perform funerals. In this sense, temples function like a family business, and temples are handed down to the first son. When it comes to women's presence in the clergy, approximately half are priests and 2 to 3% are abbots. Women are seldom trained to run temples, and most of them come to temple leadership due to sudden deaths.

Here, Dr. Rowe introduces us to the first female priest of the evening: Honda San, the 25th abbot of a Pure Land temple in Tokyo. (Note: All of the priest's names have been changed in order to protect their privacy). An ex-biker, Honda took over the temple after her brother, the previous abbot, died. She was married, but her husband divorced her after they learned that she could not bear children. Honda was hit hard, but her work at a vet hospital helped her to cope. She was convinced to take over the temple, and put all of her effort into her training. Her previous life still shines through, however, and Dr. Rowe noted her stinging sarcasm and more-than-occasional swearing when her temper flared. Passionate, Honda does not hold back when expressing her somewhat controversial views. Her take on female priests may be surprising: she does not necessarily approve, and thinks that most need to work harder and not act so entitled to priesthood. After all, Honda had to work hard at changing the pitch of her chanting in order to match that of her male counterparts, and she shaves her head in order to look like the male priests. She is still frustrated with the privilege that the male priests enjoy due to the patriarchal institution; Dr. Rowe suggests that her harsh critique comes from her need to prove her own authenticity.

Next, the audience is taken north to Sapporo to meet a Nichiren priest called Ishida San. Ishida is a former lay woman who ordained at her husband's request. When her husband died, she took over the temple in order to keep the temple in the family, and allow her son to take over when he came of age. As an "outsider," Ishida sees a gap between the devout-faith ideal and the business-minded reality of priesthood. She had many doubts about her ability to take over. She was not the only one with doubts: there was lots of opposition to her appointment from the parishioners. She persists in this role for the sake of her son. One of her biggest critiques of the Buddhist institution is that she, as a female, has to be a wife, a mother, and an abbot all at once. Male abbots only have to be abbots. Dr. Rowe also presents Ishida's take on the controversial section of the *Lotus Sutra* (central to Nichiren teachings) on women's ability to achieve enlightenment. The *Lotus Sutra* states that it is possible for all to achieve enlightenment, but classical interpretation affords women lesser status. In the 10th chapter, a Naga girl stuns all gathered in the Buddha's presence when she gifts him a jewel and then becomes a Buddha. Some read this as meaning that the Naga girl has to transform into a man in order to become a Buddha. Ishida sees this differently. When the Buddha accepts the jewel, he recognizes her enlightenment, but the lesser beings in their company could not accept a female becoming a Buddha, and so out of compassion she transforms into a man first. Ishida defends this view staunchly. After all, she says, is it not an insult to think of your birth as impure? Ishida's example is important because it reminds us that Buddhist women negotiate their understanding and experience of the teachings; they do not just blindly observe what is told to them from above.

The last woman we meet is Ando, a professional sermonizer who resides on Mt. Koya. She has an energetic, contained demeanor, is non-judgemental, and genuine in her concern for the world around her. For example, she talks on the phone in front of a mirror, to imitate an in-person conversation and to give her full attention/honour to the person she

is speaking with. Ando has been disowned by her family. Born to a Catholic mother and non-religious father, Ando was mocked by her parents and sister when she expressed her interest in becoming a Buddhist priest and was eventually kicked out when she followed through. Her faith comes from a view of the world as sacred through and through. When Ando's child died from ALS, she phoned her mentor who simply replied with "good" and hung up. For a long time this bothered Ando, but when she followed up with him to express her confusion and offense, he replied that it was good not because the child died, but because the child's death gave Ando the capacity to understand the pain that such a loss creates. With compassion, she could use her experience to console women in a way no one else could. Even the grief from her child's death was infused with sacred meaning and experience.

We come to the end of our journey across Japan, leaving the company of a biker, a widow, and a bodhisattva to return to the gallery. Dr. Rowe uses these examples to show that it is not only the top one percent of priests that are interesting: priests, male or female, are ordinary people like us, with complex histories and experiences that make them interesting. He invites us to imagine that everyone in the room is a bodhisattva wearing a human mask, each one, like Ando, trying to help others along the way. Everyday people, like everyday things, can be extraordinary.