

INTRODUCTION

One of the most prominent features of Japanese Buddhism today is the importance religious objects play in it. Household altars (*butsudan*), rosaries (*juzu*), amulets and talismans (*omamori*, *ofuda*), funerary tablets (*ibai*), relics, images, containers of sacred objects (reliquaries, sutra boxes, etc.), priestly and ceremonial robes, sutra booklets, sutra copies, temple and sectarian literature of various kinds, certificates, registers and miscellaneous documents (initiation certificates, receipts from donations, etc.), ritual implements, postcards, and souvenirs—all these material entities play some role in ceremonies, devotional activities, and in a broader sense, in the way Buddhists define their identity. In addition, for fifteen centuries, Buddhism has intervened on the physical landscape of Japan with thousands of temples and halls scattered throughout the realm. Buddhist presence on the territory ranges from major monastic complexes, some of enormous dimensions (e.g., Mt. Kōya, Mt. Hiei, and other institutions in the Kyoto-Nara region in central Japan and in other parts of the country), down to simple marks of the sacred such as buddha images in stone (*sekibutsu*) and small-dimension shrines in the countryside, along roads, and in back alleys of the cities. These icons and architectural formations constitute powerful testimonies to Buddhist material intervention aimed at the production of a specific culture through the transformation of nature. Furthermore, we should also consider the fact that meditation and ritual practices in general aim at transforming the practitioner's body into an "object"—an "image" of the Buddha-body—with all the ambiguity involved in this term: Is an image a copy? A reflection? A symbol? Or is it a "double" of the "real

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thing”? The same kind of questions can also be raised concerning relics and icons—two major categories of Buddhist sacred objects.

The scholarly movement called Critical Buddhism (*hihan bukkyō*) pointed to the importance of materiality in Japanese Buddhism. It coined the term *dhātuvāda* (the “doctrine of the existence of an underlying material substance”) to indicate the basic outlook of the dominant forms of Japanese Buddhism, with their emphasis on the existence and function of an underlying cosmic substance envisioned as the source and ultimate goal of Buddhist practice.¹ However, Critical Buddhism strongly criticized such aspects of Japanese Buddhism and thus failed to investigate the modes in which materiality has affected religious thought and practice in the Japanese Buddhist tradition. Responses to the movement in general tended to ignore the connection between Buddhist substantialist thought and ritual uses of material objects in Japan.²

In an important sense, then, “being a Buddhist” in contemporary Japan is often signified by the possession of some tokens of Buddhism—that is, some Buddhist *objects*, most usually a home shrine known as *butsudan* (lit., “Buddha altar”) with related paraphernalia (family register, scriptures, statues, ancestor tablets, paintings, etc.), a tomb with its Buddhist funerary symbolism, amulets bought at a temple, and in some rarer cases, art objects. Formal affiliation to a specific Buddhist denomination is indicated by the kind of *butsudan* one owns. Of course, this should not be understood as a form of “degeneration.” As Jean Baudrillard has convincingly argued, objects establish a “more or less consistent system of meanings” and behaviors³ and play an important role in establishing and representing their users’ identity and worldview.

These objects and related practices have always generated an economy of sizable proportions. Even without detailed figures, the sheer number of temples selling religious objects and all the stores specializing in family altars (*butsudan*) and other paraphernalia indicate that the monetary dimensions of this phenomenon are impressive. There is a constant development of new segments of the religious market to address new “spiritual needs” (many of which are in fact social issues), such as *pokkuri* temples to pray for a sudden and painless death, *mizuko* rituals for aborted fetuses, pilgrimage-like tourism, and car blessing—all of which involve a vast range of religious services and objects (commodities). Japanese contemporary religiosity has been defined as “momentary” if not even “punctiform” (people tend to

engage in religious activity only when they need it and ignore religion at all other times). However, if one considers the proliferation and use of religious commodities and services, such momentariness acquires unexpected continuity and duration. Thus, from the perspective of religious objects and their role in everyday Japanese life, the presence of religion (and of Buddhism in particular) is far more pervasive than people usually acknowledge. In a sense, it is possible to define the Buddhist system of commodities by borrowing Reader and Tanabe's concept of a "total-care system" providing "for every individual need and requirement in spiritual and material terms throughout one's life, from birth to death and even the afterlife."⁴

Buddhism can thus be understood also, and significantly, as a complex way of interacting with "material" objects to achieve some "spiritual" goals. It is a fact, indeed, that the relation between materiality and spirituality has always been problematic and conflictual within the Buddhist tradition, as the chapters in this book will show. I do not mean to imply that Japanese Buddhism has become degenerated and has lost touch with its "original essence." Far from that, my intention is to point to an important cultural phenomenon that deserves attention and analysis also from a Buddhological perspective. In fact, Buddhist philosophical speculation (not just ritual practice) has always paid enormous attention to the role of material objects and materiality in general. As the life of the Buddha teaches us, liberation can only be attained by walking a middle path between materialism and asceticism, between attachment to material entities and renouncement. Nevertheless, contemporary Japanese authors have usually studied the Buddhist philosophy of objects as a purely doctrinal matter isolated from larger cultural and ideological issues. Most of them consider it the manifestation in Buddhist terms of an ahistorically understood Shinto animism that is believed to permeate the Japanese cultural tradition. In some cases, this is related to a vague environmental concern supposedly generated by such animism. One of the goals of this book is to formulate a critique of such interpretations.

Until recently, Western scholarship has tended to ignore the Buddhist internal ambivalence toward objects and has stressed instead so-called "spiritual aspects" of Buddhist thought and practice: an emphasis on meditation as essentially a mental discipline (rather than a bodily practice) on the ritual side, together with stress on disembodied and decontextualized cognitive and doctrinal issues. Analogously, written texts of a sectarian, dogmatic,

prescriptive, and elite nature have generally been the main subject of Buddhistological study. The assumptions underlying such an attitude were that religion is a matter of the spirit, not of the body; that it involves mainly feelings and cognitive states and not interaction with objects; and that the study of prescriptive written texts would tell us what practitioners “believe” and therefore how they behave. These assumptions were forcefully reasserted in early modern Europe by Calvin and the Jansenists, among others, but they have a long history in the Western intellectual tradition, dating back to at least Plato’s envisioning matter as the lowest form of being. Marxism also criticizes “the false conviction that objects have an inherent value or sacred content, whereas in fact they derive all their value and sacred properties from human relations.”⁵ Of course, the Christian tradition also includes important elements that support a religious role for materiality, in particular the Incarnation.⁶

Gregory Schopen has pointed out the fact that Indian Buddhism has been studied by modern scholars in a “decidedly peculiar” way⁷ because of their almost exclusive emphasis on textual and doctrinal sources. As Schopen writes, “This material records what a small, atypical part of the Buddhist community wanted that community to believe or practice.”⁸ In contrast, there is another body of material that has been largely ignored or dismissed by modern scholars, namely, archeological and epigraphical material that “records or reflects at least a part of what Buddhists—both lay people and monks—actually practiced and believed.”⁹ Schopen argues that the focus on doctrinal sources “looks, in fact, uncannily like the position taken by a variety of early Protestant reformers who were attempting to define and establish the locus of ‘true religion’ . . . Proponents of this new and historically peculiar conception of religion . . . were of necessity forced to systematically devalue and denigrate what religious people actually did and deny that it had any place in true religion. This devaluation, not surprisingly but in fact almost obsessively, focused on material objects.”¹⁰ Schopen’s considerations are particularly productive and can be extended beyond archeology to material objects in general and beyond Indian Buddhism to Buddhism in general and Japanese Buddhism in particular.

Study of the material aspects of Buddhism has become a fashionable subject, although it is still a marginal topic. Scholars increasingly feel the need to go beyond scriptures to understand actual (lived) experiences of Buddhists; this involves attention to material objects as clues to their uses

and their role in Buddhist practice. Buddhist studies have recently begun to address extensively the status of images, relics, and the actual role of “experience” (as based on object-centered bodily practices rather than on mental discipline) within the Buddhist tradition.¹¹ However, objects tend to be studied as components of a standardized devotional context, and their significance is essentially confined to the framework of merit-making ideology. A risk inherent in such approaches is to continue the traditional distinction between an elite tradition dealing with texts and doctrines and a popular tradition dealing with objects and rituals.

Melford Spiro has proposed three different modalities of Buddhism, which he defines as nibbanic, kammatic, and apotropaic, respectively. The nibbanic level refers to the quest for ultimate salvation; historically, this has been the concern of a rather small group of Buddhist practitioners. Kammatic Buddhism refers to the various processes of merit making and is primarily concerned with improving the material existence in this world (including the next reincarnations) as a means also for spiritual betterment. Finally, apotropaic or magical forms of Buddhism are concerned with securing protection from evil forces and natural disasters—aspects that are commonly, but incorrectly, referred to today as “superstitions.”¹² According to received interpretations, the role of materiality decreases when one moves from a magical dimension to a kammatic one and disappears completely at the nibbanic level. However, this book will show that it is not possible to envision, not to mention practice, a nibbanic form of Buddhism without material representations—such as symbols, images, and ritual implements. In fact, there seems to be little difference in the importance of material objects in Buddhist practice, be it aimed at ultimate salvation, merit-making, or apotropaic purposes.

Buddhist objects of everyday use—such as family altars, funeral paraphernalia, amulets, souvenirs, and even professional ritual implements—still tend to escape Buddhological study. They remain solidly in the ambit of anthropology and folklore¹³ as an inferior category of objects, essentially unrelated to philosophical speculations but pertaining instead to popular mentalities often perceived as uninformed if not “superstitious.”¹⁴

This book tries to overcome the dichotomy opposing scholastic and doctrinal themes and popular practices by dealing not just with objects as part of Buddhist cults but by focusing on the ways Buddhist thinkers have conceived of objects and materiality in general. Of course, doctrinal

formulations of material issues influenced and actual practices (even if the practitioners were not aware of it), and at the same time larger cultural determinations in people's dealing with "things" influenced and the way Buddhist thinkers thought. It is important, therefore, to pay attention to the material evidence of what Buddhists "actually practiced and believed," to borrow Schopen's words, and the modalities of their practices and beliefs. In this respect, material objects play an extremely significant role. In Japan, in particular, there is a large body of studies of Buddhist religious objects and ritual implements. However, they are usually treated either from a traditional art history perspective as manifestations of aesthetic taste and craftsman's technical ability (as in the case of Buddhist art objects and ritual implements) or in a users' manual kind of approach (e.g., in countless Japanese books on funerals, sutra copying, and the use of *butsudan*), rather than as indications of modes of interaction with the sacred—a perspective that is, however, present in ethnographic and anthropological studies. Few attempts have been made to address systematically issues already posed by Baudrillard such as "how objects are experienced, what needs other than functional ones they answer, what mental structures are interwoven with—and contradict—their functional structures, or what cultural, intracultural or transcultural system underpins their directly experienced everydayness."¹⁵

Without confining myself to the field known as material culture (although I am aware of its methodologies and theoretical contributions), I attempt to outline a Buddhist philosophy of objects (especially as it was developed by the Shingon and other esoteric traditions) and, at the same time, its impact on everyday attitudes toward material entities. That is, I discuss how certain objects and cultural practices related to their use were expressions of the Japanese Buddhist worldview at a given period and within a specific social milieu. Focus on esoteric Buddhism (*mikkyō*), and the Shingon school in particular, is dictated not by sectarian concerns but by the simple fact that this happens to be my area of specialization, on the one hand, and by the recognition of its impact on the history of Japanese Buddhism, as indicated by scholars such as Kuroda Toshio, Taira Masayuki, and Satō Hiroo, among others, on the other hand.¹⁶ Furthermore, it is obvious to me that contemporary beliefs and practices cannot be adequately grasped without an understanding of their "archeology" or "genealogy" in Foucaultian terms—their social and historical processes of production and transformation. Thus, I mobilize an array of sources and approaches,

ranging from Buddhist studies and intellectual history to folklore studies and anthropology; in some cases, I even did fieldwork. As a result, we see a constant attention toward objects and materiality throughout history not only among the learned elites but also among the illiterate.

This book analyzes some Japanese Buddhist attempts to define and come to terms with the religious status of objects and their power. I identify a number of central ideas and practices surrounding the treatment of materiality in the history of Japanese Buddhism. In particular, I investigate a number of steps in an ideal process in the cultural life of matter and religious objects. This process goes from raw materials to cultural artifacts and further to profane and sacred objects, the latter in turn exemplified by visual (icons) and linguistic (sacred texts) representations. This process involves theoretical issues of representation and embodiment (how to give shape to the sacred) and also social and historical issues such as the Buddhist interaction with previous ideas and forms of the sacred and subsequent responses to such Buddhist endeavor. In short, the cultural life of materiality can be summarized in three stages. First, there was the transformation of nature into cultural artifacts and of the profane into the sacred. Second, objects were related to issues of representation and to the attainment of religious goals (in all the three registers identified by Spiro). Third, objects and materiality were connected to the ways Buddhism tried to influence, if not control, the everyday life of people in Japan.

It has rightly been suggested by Bernard Faure that Buddhism in general “has little to say about the domestic sphere” of ordinary people.¹⁷ However, it seems that, at least in the case of Japan, Buddhism was able to expand its sphere of influence to the realm of everyday life as well through combinatory ideas and practices (known as “combinations of kami and buddhas,” *shinbutsu shūgō*) that characterized Japanese religiosity until the early Meiji period. In particular, the field of materiality (the ontological status of trees and the environment, the role of tools, the representation of deities, etc.) was the privileged arena in which Buddhism actively interacted with local “Shinto” cults and through which Buddhism actively affected the everyday dimension of reality. I have tried to bring together all of these threads in their various manifestations in the chapters of this book. In fact, even though each chapter addresses a separate subject (a distinct issue or set of issues in the field of Buddhist materiality), all chapters deal with the general topics I just indicated: the ontology of material entities, their semiotic

status (especially as related to the representation of the sacred), and their soteriological value (also as expressed by ritual activities).

This book focuses not on the most obvious objects that characterize Buddhist practice, such as icons, relics, temples, and liturgical implements, but rather on a series of doctrines, material entities, and practices that are often ignored or downplayed in spite of their importance for Buddhist practice. These include philosophical treatments of materiality, the systematic meaning of objects, trees as an important source of raw materials and as a receptacle of symbolic formations, professional tools that were sacralized and used for ceremonies related to work, and memorial rituals for exhausted objects. Even when I deal with a more “mainstream” subject such as Buddhist texts, I have attempted to look at it in light of a different approach, as in the case of sutras and other important Buddhist books whose devotional role is related to their material nature as sacred *objects* rather than as doctrinal *texts*. All objects I discuss in this book are related partly to religious practice and partly to activities taking place in secular life.

The book is structured in the following way. First, I present a theoretical discussion of the status and meaning of Buddhist objects and their role in shaping and representing the Buddhist worldview to both insiders (practitioners) and outsiders (scholars). In particular, I discuss scholastic doctrines on materiality, objects, and the environment (envisioned as the material basis of life and soteriological activity) and their impact on Japanese culture at large (the arts, economics, politics, and religious rituals). Sacred texts also display features that transcend their textual, linguistic meaning and refer instead, more or less directly, to their material status. Then, I focus on processes of transformation of raw materials into Buddhist artifacts, which are also processes of transformation of the profane into the sacred. Buddhist images and objects in general were often envisioned not just as representations but as living embodiments of divinities. Thus, I describe how Japanese Buddhists envisioned trees (since the Heian period, the main raw material for Buddhist artifacts), although not exclusively in connection with religious icons. Tools and labor were important components in this process of transformation; in fact, tools were often treated as ritual implements and embodiments of deities, and labor was envisioned as a sacred, salvific activity. Finally, I address some aspects of an opposite process of transformation involving materiality—namely, the ways in which originally profane, everyday objects are transformed into sacred entities through processes of memorialization.

Let me now introduce each chapter in more detail.

Premodern Buddhist thinkers devoted considerable intellectual efforts to defining the ontological and soteriological status of matter and objects. Chapter 1 presents the Buddhist philosophy of objects and the material world primarily as developed by the Shingon and Tendai schools in Japan. This philosophy is typified by doctrines according to which nonsentient beings can become buddhas, generally known with their reductive formulation as “plants become buddhas” (*sōmoku jōbutsu*). Modern interpretations understand them as manifestations of a peculiar Japanese (rather than generally Buddhist) “love for nature.” However, I will show that the medieval Japanese discourse on the material environment addresses a number of social concerns, such as the status of the members of the initiatory lineages producing these doctrines, the ontology of social order, the control of the material world of the nonsentients, and the distribution of its wealth. As such, doctrines on the Buddha-nature of plants played an important ideological role in the creation of a vision of order and of power relations in society and cannot be reduced to mere environmental issues.

Chapter 2 is a general introduction to the study of Buddhist objects; it addresses ambivalent Buddhist attitudes toward material objects and equally ambivalent attitudes displayed by scholars. In particular, I investigate the ways in which the Buddhist Dharma itself was conceived of in material terms and a number of doctrinal treatments of the representation of the sacred and the ontology of icons as a paradigmatic typology of sacred objects.

Chapter 3 further develops the theme of the materiality of the sacred by investigating in depth the material nature of Buddhist sacred texts. I approach scriptures and other books not just as written “signifiers” conveying Buddhist “signifieds.” Rather, I view them as religious artifacts requiring operations and manipulations that are not just of a cognitive/interpretive kind but involve instead several forms of performative activities.

Chapter 4 outlines the Japanese imagination (in the sense of the French *imaginaire*) of trees and the natural world. The importance of trees in premodern Japanese culture cannot be overestimated. Within the realm of Buddhism, trees were the raw materials for temples, tools, and icons; paper was made from plants. Even the production of metal needed fire, which was of course alimented by trees (coal). It is understandable, then, that an influential symbolic apparatus was associated with trees. I draw on a number of different sources—ranging from Buddhist doctrinal treatises to popu-

lar narratives, from medieval legal documents to early-modern Confucian and Nativist texts, from contemporary *Nihonjinron* to medieval initiatory rituals—and trace a genealogy of the idea of the Japanese love for nature—an important element in modern Japanese cultural identity—back to medieval Buddhist ideas about the material world. These ideas developed not simply out of environmental concerns but also and especially to legitimize the social and economic status of religious institutions.

Chapter 5 discusses the symbolic role of work tools and rituals for professionals and for aspects of the everyday secular life of the people. Especially during the Edo period, Buddhist institutions envisioned professional tools as transformations of ritual implements and embodiments of deities and the mandala. Employment of tools was configured on a metahistorical level involving myth, symbolism, and specifically religious goals such as salvation and the acquisition of worldly benefits. Thus, secular action in this world was conceived of as involving sacred entities. The establishment of a sacred ordering of reality was carried out not only through specialized operations conducted by religious professionals but also through secular everyday activities.

Chapter 6 deals with memorial services (*kuyō*) for exhausted objects held at several Japanese Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. I first describe some of these services as they are performed today by temples of different denominations and shrines. I then trace a genealogy of contemporary memorial services for inanimate objects by relating them to late medieval and early modern documents and practices concerning specific ritual objects and, further back, to medieval Shingon doctrines about the possibility for inanimate objects to become buddhas (discussed in Chapter 1). Such a genealogy of memorial rituals and their intellectual background will provide an overview of the shifting attitudes toward objects in Japanese culture and the role played by Buddhism in it.

In the final chapter, I propose some theoretical considerations that might be helpful in studying Buddhist objects (and perhaps, also religious objects in general) by drawing on analytic approaches from semiotics and cultural studies. In particular, I explore the concept of “commodity” to define the nature and functions of what can be called “religious commodities” as part of a more general economy of the sacred.