

Sewing the Buddhist Robe: Innovation and Inclusion

Special talk by Dr. Diane Riggs

2-3pm, Thursday, October 24

1720 Sangren Hall

In eighteenth century Japan a Shingon Buddhist teacher, Jiun Onkō (1718-1804), was determined to establish a true reform of Buddhist practice and teachings, beginning with the Buddhist robe. Jiun consulted the ancient Buddhist monastic rules, but his genius was to award considerable authority to sculptures, paintings, and textiles extant in Japan as evidence of the fidelity of Japanese Buddhists to the teachings of the Buddha. Jiun's confidence in what Japanese Buddhist material culture could tell us about living Buddhist practice was both innovative and unprecedented. Yet, Jiun also understood that mere scholarship could not convert hearts and minds. He inspired his followers to produce 1000 Buddhist robes in honor of the 1000 robes sent by Prince Nagaya (684-729) to China. The project involved the participation of both lay and ordained followers, a remarkably inclusive project that had a wide ranging impact. This talk, based on research and fieldwork in Japan, will explore the implications of Jiun's innovative and inclusive approach to the Buddhist robe and its later impact on Sōtō Zen teachers and on Zen Buddhist practitioners in America.



Diane E. Riggs is a Master Faculty Specialist at Western Michigan University. She received her PhD from the Asian Languages and Cultures department at UCLA in 2010. Her dissertation, "The Cultural and Religious Significance of Japanese Buddhist Vestments" is the first full-length study of Japanese Buddhist robes that integrates textual sources with historical and contemporary Buddhist material culture. The revised manuscript is being considered for publication by Kuroda Institute.



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