

Cosmic Disk: Mediating the Kumano Jikkai Mandala on DVD

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Professors Ronald Toby, David Plath, Brian Ruppert and their assistant Valerie Barske presented “Cosmic Disc: Mediating the Kumano Jikkai Mandala on DVD.” The discussion started with an explanation and screening of part of the video that the DVD accompanies, “Preaching With Pictures,” which juxtaposes depictions in the Kumano Jikkai Mandala with those of an illustrated screen of the city of Edo from roughly the same era; Toby and Plath described how they had been inspired in part by the documentary on the mandala hosted by Professor Kuroda Hideo (Historiographical Institute, University of Tokyo), and had completed the video some two years ago. After the fascination with which the video had been greeted by scholars in several previous venues where it was screened, Toby and Plath decided to expand the project to include a DVD, at which point they invited Brian Ruppert to take part. The team then invited Professors Barbara Ambros (International Christian University), D. Max Moerman (Barnard College) and Henry D. Smith II (Columbia University) to take part in videotaped conversations on Japanese history and religion to be included on the DVD. The fruit of this undertaking is the Video-DVD that will be released by the Media Production Group (MPG) in late May/early June, entitled *Preaching from Pictures, A Japanese Mandala*.

Toby, Plath and Ruppert then demonstrated a portion of the DVD featuring Henry D. Smith II’s and Toby’s conversation about Edo life and religion. One of the points the team made about this production was that it has been a multilayered project that has developed over time in what were originally unforeseen directions. The discourse of the DVD is related to yet different from the video—the video presents the world of the mandala and of Edo daily life in very straightforward language that anyone ranging from an advanced high school student to a young college student can comprehend. However, the DVD takes a dialogical approach that introduces viewers to the complexities of everyday life and of religious practice in the premodern and early modern eras. They explained that, in a sense, the Video-DVD framework weaves together narratives that mediate viewers’ own movement of imagination from the initial pictorial experience to an evolving and deeper understanding of problems related to the Kumano Jikkai Mandala, such as gender, pilgrimage, fundraising, as well as concepts of karma and rebirth.

The presenters also emphasized their view that the Video-DVD can be used in a variety of ways. They may be used in introductory courses in which just part of the video might be shown, perhaps along with one or more of the dialogues for explanatory purposes—and perhaps, spark discussion in class on issues suggested or illustrated by the Video-DVD. Some relevant issues might be: How was Buddhism or religion integrated into daily life in the Tokugawa Era? How might we understand women’s positions as producers and receivers of meaning in the ritual context of performance of Jikkai Mandala preaching? How might such practices have been related to the economic life of

Kumano Bikuni or of those around them? How might we interpret the Jikkai mandala in terms of esoteric Buddhist traditions of ritual use of mandalas, or of visualization practices more generally? What are the origins of the actual notion of a Jikkai mandala or of the discourse of Kanjin meditation, and how might this be related to the origins of the Kumano Bikuni (and their connection, for example, with Shugendō ascetics)?

The audience offered a number of important questions and contributions concerning the character and content of the Video-DVD. One scholar noted uses of terms like “eternal” referring to the punishment in Hells mentioned in the video, to which David Plath noted that while some descriptions were not always absolutely correct, he and Toby were limited in terms of time in the original production of the video. Another scholar questioned the use of non-Japanese music for the video, to which Toby noted that we do not know what the presentation may have sounded like at the time of preaching of the mandala; at the same time, Kazuko Goodman’s reading of a text in the *Michiyuki shū* depicting the contents of the mandala is part of the DVD, and was screened for the audience. Others in the audience noted that the video-DVD would prove useful in courses on Edo era religion and history.