Zen monks absorbed in deep zazen座禅 meditation. Family fathers in priest robes next to their wives and children or with their colleagues in annual temple ceremonies. Part-time ascetics on spiritual pilgrimage in remote mountains, ‘Mercedes priests’ enjoying prestige and the fruits of tourist temples and funeral industry. Tonsured monks on periodic almsbegging in front of humbly bowing danka檀家 members. Wives of priests serving tea and culture to the local community. Renunciate nuns living an isolated and quiet existence. These images of Japanese Buddhist priests identify them as individuals and yet they share many roles, interests, images and functions, the differences of which depend on sects and institutions. This article introduces aspects of the ideal and living realities of the contemporary Japanese Buddhist priest and clergy. Though mainly based on research on the Rinzai Zen branch Myōshinji妙心寺, it also attempts to make generalizations, reflecting priesthood beyond sectarian divisions (Borup 2008).

What is a Buddhist Priest? Terminology and Typology

Generally, a priest is understood to be a person with a certain authority within a religious organization, being part of an overall group of specialists with religious authority and functions, the clergy. Both words are of western (Greek) and Christian origin, and apart from the challenges of transplanting such concepts from one linguistic and cultural sphere to another, it is difficult to delimit a Japanese concept to comprise the Buddhist priest as an occupational group. The Agency of Cultural Affairs collects statistical data on religions in Japan and characterizes the clergy this way: “For the most part it refers to people who belong to a particular religious organization and devote themselves full time to its activities” (1989: 235). However, the Agency acknowledges the fact that religious organizations have their own set of criteria for concepts of ‘priest’ or ‘clergy’. The terminology of the religious individuals and institutions has also changed throughout history, and contemporary terms suggesting the variety of institutional roles
and statuses (such as 住職, jūshoku 住職, kanchō 管長, rōshi 老師, 
-danka, shintō 信徒, and monto 門徒) were not in use in medieval Japan 
and thus reflect both the conceptual and the institutional development 
of Buddhist history.

Methods of counting the clergy differ from sect to sect and are seldom 
precisely defined. Traditional Buddhists groups usually use and distin-
guish between the generic concepts for teacher, priest and clergy, namely 
kyōshi 教師, jūshoku, and sōryo 僧侶. An official and juridical terminology 
as defined by the Agency of Cultural Affairs uses kyōshi to designate the 
‘religious instructor’ as a person qualified within a religious organization 
(or ‘juridical person’, hōjin 法人) to teach. Kyōshi is also part of individual 
ranking systems in Buddhist sects. It thus designates not only an either/ 
or status, but also a specific rank in a hierarchical grading system, which 
gives certain status and symbolic capital in the clergy and the institution. 
Using such a yardstick to measure statistics of the Japanese Buddhist 
clergy would leave us with 281,054 of such Buddhist religious instructors, 
half of which are women and less than 150 are of foreign origin (Bunkachō 
2009). Such figures comprise those having been qualified to teach but not, 
for instance, those having been ordained or those employed as priests 
without such teaching qualifications.

Jūshoku is the term most often used to describe the priest, a title and 
function being part of the overall, generic term for clergy, sōryo (or in 
its abbreviated form sō 僧) comprising both priests, monks, nuns, retired 
and assistant priests. Within some organisations sōryo also includes the 
wives of priests. It is a major characteristic of Japanese Buddhism in gen-
eral, that temples and clergy are part of a family tradition. Most Japanese 
priests are married, and the majority have taken over their fathers’ office 
due to the widespread temple heritage system (seshūsei 世襲制), being 
the clerical parallel to the lay supporters’ danka (family patron) system, 
both underlining Buddhism in Japan as a family religion.

Sōryo in monastic Buddhist organizations is, however, also often inter-
changeable with the concept of monk (shukke 出家, see below), or dis-
tinguished from this category, understood as a member of the educated 
clergy, having semantic affinity to other concepts and titles of honor with 
the same connotations: shūkyōsha 宗教者 (religious specialist), bukkyōsha 
仏教者 (Buddhist priest), oshō 和尚 (virtuous monk), or to underline the 
institutional affiliation, zensō 禅僧 (Zen monk/priest). Thus for instance, 
within the Rinzai Zen Buddhist Myōshinji branch of the Rinzai Zen sect, 
there are approximately 7,000 sōryo, 3,300 of which are religious teachers