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# New American Zen: Examining American Women's Adaptation of Traditional Japanese Soto Zen Practice

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

NEW AMERICAN ZEN:  
EXAMINING AMERICAN WOMEN'S ADAPTATION  
OF TRADITIONAL JAPANESE SOTO ZEN PRACTICE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

LIBERAL STUDIES

by

Courtney Just

2011

To: Dean Kenneth Furton  
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Courtney Just, and entitled *New American Zen: Examining American Women's Adaptation of Traditional Japanese Soto Zen Practice*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

---

Laurie Shrage

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Kiriake Xerohemona

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Lesley A. Northup, Major Professor

Date of Defense: November 10, 2011

The thesis of Courtney Just is approved.

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Dean Kenneth Furton  
College of Arts and Science

---

Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi  
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2011

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family. First to the Justs... Thank you for working and saving not for yourselves, but so that I could have a better future. I don't know if my success with this degree would have been possible without your help. I carry you all with me in all I do.

And next to the Tylers... Mom and Keith, you both ingrained in me the importance of an education as something that "no one can take away." I thought I understood this at seven, but now I get it. There is no place like a home with love and hugs, encouragement and laughter—and you both gave me all of this. Thank you for always being there with open arms.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I've worked hard during my graduate career and thesis writing process, though my success is due in large part to many people. Dr. Xerohemona, as my graduate advisor, I thank you for your guidance and kind encouragement. Dr. Shrage, your keen insights on feminist theories and women's rights are important to me and my work. Thank you for taking on my project and for your support during this process. To Dr. Northup, my committee chair, your work on women and ritual studies was invaluable to my project. Thank you for your dedication to my thesis and for your guidance and mentoring throughout my graduate career. I was privileged to take two classes with you and each provoked examination, among other things, of myself and my socially constructed reality. As result I believe I am a more informed person and will one day, hopefully, be as inspiring a professor to someone as you are to me.

Deep gassho in gratitude to the women and men I interviewed for my research who graciously took the time to answer my questions. Your revelations and insights made this project what it is. I enjoyed learning from you and hearing about your personal expression of Soto Zen. Thank you, Rev. Teijo Munnich for having me to Great Tree and for our in depth conversation. Meeting and practicing with you was very special. Thank you also to the men and women who I met on Skype or through email conversations: Rev. Patricia Dai-En Bennage, abbess at Mt. Equity Zendo in Pennsylvania; Catherine Anraku Hondorp, priest at Village Zendo, New York; Sensei Meg Levie, priest at Green Gultch Zen Center in California; Roshi Wendy Egyoku Nakao, abbot and head teacher of Zen Center Los Angeles; Shotai de la Rosa, head priest of the Daishin Zendo in Florida; Myoan Grace Schireson, abbess of the Empty Nest Zendo in California; Peter Schneider

of Beginners Mind Zen Center in California; Abbott Myogen Steve Stucky of the San Francisco Zen Center; Julie Kirin Myoko Terestman, priest at Village Zendo, New York; and Ted O'Toole, senior priest in training at Minnesota Zen Mediation Center

My thanks and gratitude to Paula Arai, Zen scholar and educator, first for inspiring me to write about Soto Zen women after reading her book, Women Living Zen, and also for taking time to grant me an interview. I greatly appreciate your support and genuine interest in helping me with my thesis.

Last, but not least, I'd like to thank my other, Zu. Your support and encouragement throughout this journey and reminders to enjoy the process, in moments when I'd forget to see the big picture, is appreciated more than I can say. ...but I know you know what I mean.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS  
NEW AMERICAN ZEN: EXAMINING AMERICAN WOMEN'S ADAPTATION OF  
TRADITIONAL JAPANESE SOTO ZEN PRACTICE

by

Courtney Just

Florida International University, 2011

Miami, Florida

Dr. Lesley A. Northup, Major Professor

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the history and rituals of Japanese Soto Zen nuns and American Soto Zen ordained women in order to examine the motivations behind each group's practices and distinguish the differences in the intent and practice of American Soto women's rituals, specifically their reactions to the influence of feminism, and the effects of American syncretization in order to identify if a schism or a continuation is occurring within the Soto Zen tradition. Along with a survey of published research, interviews were conducted with two scholars and prominent ordained Soto practitioners—eight female and three male. Findings suggest that while maintaining strict adherence to specific orthodox rituals, American Soto women also reinterpret Soto traditions and adapt new practices to address the needs of American women's practice. Findings further indicate the effects of American syncretization in nurturing a legitimate albeit uniquely American expression of Soto Zen.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	INTRODUCTION .....	1
II	HISTORY .....	13
	Women in Early Buddhism .....	20
	Women in Japanese Buddhism .....	20
	Japanese Soto Zen .....	23
	Soto Zen in America .....	30
III	WOMEN IN SOTO ZEN .....	34
	Feminist Views on Buddhism.....	41
	Feminism in the US .....	41
	The Influence of American Feminism on Japanese Soto Zen Nuns.....	43
	Japanese Soto Zen Nuns' Fight for Equality.....	44
	American Soto Zen Women .....	47
IV	ZEN RITUAL .....	53
	Ritual Theory .....	53
	Women and Ritual .....	58
	Creating New Rituals .....	61
	Rituals in Zen .....	63
V	USE OF RITUALS BY JAPANESE SOTO ZEN NUNS ...	69
	Legitimacy as a Motive .....	69
	A Return to Roots .....	71
	Appearing Ultra Traditional .....	71
	Utilizing the Japanese Cultural Concept of Femininity.....	78
	Re-categorizing Monastic Practices.....	81
VI	LEGITIMACY FOR AMERICAN SOTO ZEN WOMEN... 85	85
	Levels of Legitimacy .....	85
	Explanation of the Term Monastic in the U.S.....	89
	Role of Laity in the U.S. ....	97
	Cultural Differences Between Japanese and American Soto Monastic Women.....	99
VII	AMERICAN SOTO WOMEN'S USE OF RITUAL .....	101
	Altering Traditional Monastic Soto Rituals .....	104
	Changing the Liturgy .....	109



	Evoking the Feminine .....	120
	Use of the <i>Prajnaparamita Sutra</i> .....	125
	Female <i>Bodhisattvas</i> on Altars .....	126
	Native American Circles .....	128
	Use of Bodywork .....	131
	Rites for Children .....	135
VIII	AMERICAN SOTO MEN .....	141
	Traditional Monastic Practices .....	141
	Women’s Rituals That Men Practice .....	143
	Women’s Rituals That Men do not Practice .....	145
IX	AMERICANIZATION .....	146
	Syncretism .....	146
	Examples in Zen .....	149
	Western Fascination with the East .....	153
	The Move toward the Ancient and Primordial .....	154
	Women’s Spirituality Movement .....	157
	Proselytization .....	159
X	CURRENT AND FUTURE STATE OF AMERICAN SOTO ZEN .....	162
	Current State of American Soto Zen .....	162
	Future of Soto Zen in America .....	167
XI	CONCLUSION .....	170
	LIST OF REFERENCES .....	179
	APPENDIX A.....	186
	APPENDIX B.....	187

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

*I look at myself...here I am this modern American woman, wearing these 13<sup>th</sup> century male monks' robes. How did I get to this point? What an odd thing when you think about it...and yet, when I look at myself and how I think and function in the world, I'm not completely manifesting [tradition]. – (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010)*

The Reverend Teijo Munnich is a Soto Zen priest with her own practice and women's retreat center called Great Tree, in the rolling hills just outside of Asheville, North Carolina. Before becoming a Soto Zen priest, she was a dancer, a teacher, and a Catholic nun. Though she has been in romantic relationships in the past, she currently is not in one, preferring instead to invest her time in the development of her students and their communal temple--this is her *sangha*. Teijo--the *Dharma* name was given to her by her teacher and is respectfully used (without the title of Reverend) by many in her *sangha*, implying not only respect but accessibility--is steeped in the Soto tradition, having studied in both Japan and the U.S. with high-ranking Soto teachers. She is highly respected by her peers. Though an ordained Soto priest and strong proponent of Soto traditions--starting with *zazen*, the seated meditation that is at the core of the practice--she feels that there is something inherently masculine about Soto, and has consciously chosen to explore the feminine in her practice and follow where this choice leads her, even if it sometimes moves her away from strict adherence to tradition (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010).

Though the Reverend Teijo's robes and clean-shaven head clearly indicate a woman of tradition, and though much of her practice is rooted in longstanding customs, she looks beyond that tradition to inform her practice. For instance, she regularly incorporates bodywork sessions consisting of yoga or Alexander Technique into her teachings. A few weeks after my visit to Great Tree, she held a women's-only workshop retreat devoted to a feminine Tibetan practice that worships feminine deities known as *Dakini*. Perhaps the best example of her willingness to meld outside influences that evoke the essence of her Soto Zen practice is a statue of a Chinese *Kuan Yin*, the female Bodhisattva of Compassion, on the altar of her Japanese style meditation hall, the *zendo*.

In my conversation with her, she discussed enjoying many aspects of tradition, but stressed the importance of being open to letting go of the constraints within the Soto tradition that she feels often do not serve the modern American woman, whatever she may look like. My visit to Great Tree and conversation with Teijo led me to wonder if other ordained Soto women in the U.S. look like her, with a shaved head and monks' robes. Is she alone in her practice of these ancillary rituals, or are other Soto women also altering the way Soto is practiced? How much does the practice of these American women differ from that of their strictly traditional Japanese counterparts?

Having done preliminary research on the Soto nuns of Nagoya, Japan, I recognize that, in many ways, throughout their history, they were engaged in traditional ritual activities to help them substantiate their legitimacy. On the other hand, my interview with the Reverend Teijo led me to question whether American monastic women are as concerned with traditional practices, perhaps a result, at least in part, to the American zeitgeist that resonates with the ideas of the women's liberation movement. Research on

women in American Zen has found that, like Teijo, many women are not simply engaging in the practice to adhere to tradition, but instead are reinterpreting what Zen means to them as women in the U.S. and seeking out ways to explore this through evolving ritual practices.

The purpose of this study is to examine how rituals are used by ordained American Soto women to create a distinctly American Soto Zen. This is one of the few times in modern history when an ancient religion is being recast by men and women as equals, where the women are likely to continue to enjoy the same roles and respect as their male counterparts. Having a better understanding of how women create and use rituals in American Soto Zen will further reveal how Buddhist monastic women in the U.S. view their role as monastics, and will also expand an understanding of the universality of the feminine. My study will also contribute to the tracking of Soto Zen's evolution on its journey from ancient Japan to its contemporary American manifestation.

## **Background**

Though several hundred years old in Japan, Soto Zen is a fairly recent arrival to the shores of America, having only been in the States since the early 1900's (Levering & Schireson, 2006). While it took about two hundred years for the tradition to take root in thirteenth-century Japan, in the US, Zen laid its roots in the fertile soil of the early twentieth century and in a short time, a distinctly American Zen began to develop. In half the time, Zen in America is doing what it took hundreds of years to do in Asia, putting down roots and absorbing the native culture to become a new and distinct religion. In the Christianized culture of America, women must face the stubbornness of historically patriarchal religious models in a country with underlying sexist assumptions.

Nonetheless, there have been years of progress won by women's liberation movements. Buddhism's fate in twenty-first century America, therefore, is being shaped by women in the tradition who are facing these issues with a renewed "freedom to view things from new perspectives" (Tsomo, 2000, p. 327).

In the long history of Buddhism, never have women played such a key role in the development of the tradition. Where there used to be few books written on the subject of women and Buddhism, there are now countless publications, most of them written by Buddhist women themselves, which incorporate woman's perspectives on important Buddhist issues ranging from *sutra* analysis to the status of women in the tradition. Within the Soto Zen sect of Buddhism, women now make up about half of all Zen teachers and students in the US. American women are at the forefront of the transitioning Zen movement, taking "meticulous care in how [it] evolves..." and consciously creating a practice that includes and supports women (Sidor, 1987, p. xix). Consequently, a uniquely Americanized Soto Zen that explores new possibilities of what it means to be an ordained Soto woman in the twenty-first century is being shaped.

This full inclusion of women is a distinct shift away from the patriarchal institutions of Japan, where centuries-old practices have traditionally held monastic women back, "relegated to roles as devout supporters, rather than as equals or leaders" within a larger Buddhist culture that has historically considered women to be the inferior sex (Sidor, 1987, p. xix). For this study, the Zen sect of particular interest in evaluating women's roles, because of the unique trajectory of its gender related evolution, is Soto, brought to Japan by Dogen Zenji in the thirteenth century. Dogen is an especially important figure in Zen because, while many of the Buddhist writers up to his time said

that women could not attain Buddhahood, Dogen emphatically stated that they could, even taking female disciples. In numerous writings and translations of his sermons, Dogen supports practice by women and criticizes those who discriminate against them and prevent them from participating. However, in the centuries after Dogen's death, many of his egalitarian ideas were undermined, and Soto monastic women came to be treated as second-class nuns, no longer on equal footing with male priests within their sect. Unfair practices discriminated against Soto women in Japan up until the 20th century, when a group of them, armed with Dogen's message, decided to regain their monastic rights (Arai, 1999).

The Soto nuns began their fight for equality around the start of the twentieth century, armed with the knowledge that Dogen began egalitarian practices when he established Soto Zen in Japan and that, as a result, they had a legitimate right to serve equally with men. It took several years of incremental progress, winning small battles one at a time. Eventually, though, these women's hard work paid off and female Soto monastics were recognized on the official Soto books as equal to men (Arai, 1999).

The work of Soto Zen scholar Paula Arai (1999) in, "Women Living Zen," takes a close look at the Soto Zen nuns of Nagoya, Japan, the modern descendants of the women who first fought to ensure monastic women's rights were recognized. In her study, Arai found that the nuns, out of necessity, placed a great deal of emphasis on their rituals to promote their campaign for legitimacy. They, like their predecessors, refer back to Dogen's claims that gender does not hold anyone back from achieving enlightenment. These nuns consider their practice of Soto Zen to be more closely in accordance with

tradition and Dogen's intentions than that of the monks, and thus claim an important degree of monastic legitimacy (Arai, 1999).

However, the nuns also engage in activities that may be considered typically feminine, often taking on the roles of caretaker or mother by running orphanages and caring for the infirm. An important ritual that the nuns participate in is *Anan Koshiki*, which "functions to legitimize and empower the nuns yet remains cloaked in the non-contentious expression of gratitude," thanking Ananda for helping to convince the Buddha to allow women into the *sangha* (Arai, 2008, p. 196). In examining the effects of ritual activities as a whole, a sense of the nuns' need to maintain legitimacy becomes apparent. The combination of these tactical rituals assists them to validate their legitimacy with both monastics and laity.

Research on ordained and monastic Soto women in the U.S. reveals that while some maintain that their gender has little or no impact on their practice, many women feel that their gender does inform how they practice the religion. For instance, many women are removing the androcentric bias in the liturgy by taking out the gendered "he" or "patriarch" in the *sutras* and replacing it with a more gender-neutral translation. In addition, women are making feminine connections with images already in the tradition. One female priest, Jiko Ruth Cutts, points out that the Zen term *blood vein*, a term referring to the passing of knowledge from teacher to student, should be seen as an image of the feminine life-giving force (Levering & Schireson, 2006).

In addition to looking for the feminine representation in what is already embedded in the tradition, women are also finding new ways of incorporating the feminine. For instance, a project to recover the names of past female Zen teachers from the Buddha's

time to the present has developed so they can be chanted in the liturgy as a counterpart to the traditional chant that only lists patriarchs.

Like the Reverend Teijo, other women have brought in rituals from various traditions, which often further explore a feminine element. For many American monastic Soto Zen women, examining their practices as women and with a feminist lens is important and something that they are actively engaged in, while for other ordained women, the desire to move beyond gender is a driving force. Either way, the paths of incorporating or moving beyond gender in ritual are the product of the combination of the American cultural climate and the Japanese nuns' crusade for equality.

### **Key Concepts.**

In order to better understand how American women are creating a new Soto Zen and where the American women's use of rituals may overlap with those of the nuns in Japan, this study will examine ritual through the lenses of ritual theory, feminism, and syncretism.

### ***Ritual.***

Despite popular misunderstanding, "Zen life is overwhelmingly a life of ritual..." (Wright, 2008, p. 4). Researching ritual in a monastery, for instance, would reveal that the entire day could be considered valid study since the nature of Zen lends itself to the consideration of each activity as a ritual behavior (Wright, 2008). Following ritualist Catherine Bell's warning against "adherence to a set definition of ritual," and to instead "identify ritual-like activities—characterized by 'formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule governance, sacred symbolism, and performance,'" this study will look at a handful



of specific rituals, including head shaving, celibacy, and liturgical forms and chants (as cited in Wright, 2008, p. 8).

***Feminism.***

Buddhist and feminist religious scholar Rita Gross has used the same definition of feminism for many years: “freedom from the prison of gender roles” (Gross, 2009, p. 112). She adds that she is not arguing for a gender-neutral unisex norm, as the terms masculine and feminine by themselves are “useful cultural constructs with which to discuss human options and possibilities” (p. 112). What Gross finds limiting is the insistence that all men can only be masculine and all women only feminine, creating a “caricature of human wholeness” that prohibits “mental-spiritual health and well-being” (p. 112).

A more direct petition to affect society poses feminism as an appeal to recognize “that women are valuable and that social change to benefit women is needed” (Crawford & Unger, 2004, p. 8). Buddhist scholar, bell hooks advocates a more focused “movement to end sexism and sexist oppression” (as cited in Crawford & Unger, 2004, p. 8). Whether this oppression and subsequent social change occur within secular society or the religious realm makes little difference, as these areas often overlap and exist within each other. Women’s treatment as equals is the important thread. This study attempts to confirm that nascent U.S. feminism likely influenced the Japanese nuns’ struggle and maintains that the spirit and history of feminism has inspired the continued move toward gender equality in Soto Zen practice.

### ***Syncretism.***

Zen history is a story of syncretism. In America, Soto Zen practitioners are selectively choosing ideas and rituals from the multi-cultural, multi-religious native atmosphere. According to religious sociologist, Lester Kurtz (2007), syncretism is “a combination of elements from more than one religion forming a new sacred canopy,” or “...sheltering fabric of security [with] answers for both the profound and the mundane questions of human life” (pp. 333, 13). Syncretism occurs when different schools of thought and action meld together. In this study, the concept will be applied to understand how Zen has evolved in its travels across borders and continues to evolve now that it has entered the U.S. Indeed, “the authority of the Japanese tradition [has begun] losing ground to the American insistence on questioning tradition,” and women are the ones asking some of the major questions regarding what is essential in the tradition and what is needed in order to appeal to the American following (Tworkov, 1989, p. 4).

### **Research Questions and Hypothesis**

This study centers on the rituals of both Japanese Soto nuns and American Soto ordained women (sometimes referred to as priests or abbesses) in order to examine the motivations behind their practice. A closer analysis of the American women’s rituals reveals that many of their practices reflect a feminist view in which an exploration of the feminine is acceptable and from a natural process of religious acculturation to America, a common phenomenon in the U.S. Guiding this study, the research questions to be explored include:

- How does ordained American Soto women’s practice differ from that of Soto nuns in Japan? This question sets up an exploration of the actual practices and the

reasons behind them, while taking into account the differing influences on and the desired outcomes of the two practices.

- Do women in American Soto Zen practice rituals for different reasons than their Japanese counterparts do? This speaks to looking at the motivation behind the practice.
- What role does American feminism play in the practice of American Soto Zen? Is it about the history of eradicating gender-based issues of discrimination in the monastic setting or more about bringing gender awareness into the practice?
- What role does Americanization play in the practice of American Soto Zen?
- If there is a difference in the practice and the reasons behind it, is the practice of American Soto Zen still Soto?
- What distinguishes American Soto Zen practice?

This study seeks to examine the proposition that American Soto Zen is undergoing a shift from its Japanese origins due to the influence of American women's practice and American syncretization, that while parting ways with strict adherence to tradition, is nevertheless nurturing a legitimate and uniquely American expression of Soto Zen.

### **Construction of Chapters**

The first section of this study focuses on history. It recounts the history of women in Buddhism, beginning with the Buddha, moving on to Dogen and Soto Zen, and ending with Zen coming to America, highlighting the differing opinions on women's inclusion throughout the religion's and the sect's major developmental stages.

In chapter three, the state of women in Soto Zen is discussed. In this section, America's first- and second-wave feminist movements are explored in terms of how they

not only influenced American women, but also Japanese Soto nuns in their crusade for sectarian equality. Furthermore, American Soto women's initial and current status as equal within the sect as the result of the legacy of these campaigns is posited. Finally, the issue of why we should be discussing gender in a Zen context at all, rather than deferring to the often-cited opinion that Zen is beyond gender and to focus on gender is not Zen, is confronted.

In the fourth chapter, ritual and how it reveals a people and their religion is discussed. Specifically, this section examines theories pertaining to new rituals, women's ritual practice, and Zen in order to contextualize what constitutes ritual in American Soto Zen and how these rituals function.

After discussing rituals in Zen from a theoretical viewpoint, the use of rituals by Japanese Soto nuns is surveyed. Specifically, the rituals they performed in the course of pursuing exemplary monastic practice and their strategies are examined to suggest that their original quest for legitimacy is still an underlying factor in their actions.

Once legitimacy as a factor in the Japanese nuns' choices is established, the role of ritual in the pursuit of legitimacy for American Soto women is explored to put that legitimacy into context in order to better understand the idea of being ordained or of being monastic American Soto women, and discern how American Soto women see themselves in relation to their Japanese counterparts. There will also be a discussion of the term "monastic," as it is used within American Soto culture. This section concludes with an examination of the role of laity in Soto practice in the U.S.

Next, American Soto women's use of rituals is addressed. After suggesting that during their formative development as religious leaders, American Soto women's idea of

legitimacy has been rooted in different soil than were those of Japanese nuns during their nascent struggles, this section looks at American Soto women's ritual practices and the motivations behind them. American Soto women appear particularly interested in guiding the practice to be more sensitive toward addressing modern needs and bringing gender awareness into the practice. They accomplish these goals by reexamining traditional Soto rituals, creating new rituals by altering and adding to the liturgy, and evoking the feminine within existing and newer rituals.

In order to put the women's practice into context within the larger American practice and to identify which, if any, rituals are unique to American women, in chapter eight, the reasons for American men's use of women's rituals are discussed to reveal why many American men choose to practice them.

In the following section, the role of Americanization in women's rituals is considered. Looking at the state of American Soto women's ritualizing in a broader context, it is clear that gender and cultural issues are being influenced by the American syncretization process. This section discusses the phenomenon of syncretism within the history of Zen to show the natural tendency toward adaptation that occurs when Zen transplants to a new place. This chapter also identifies elements of Americanization found in the rituals of American Soto women to show that the alterations can be understood in terms of American syncretization.

In the tenth chapter, the current and future state of American Soto Zen is considered. The proposition that a "softening" of American Zen is occurring as the result of both U.S. women's participation in and influence on the American Zen community, as

well as American syncretization is examined. “Softening” is defined and presented as occurring to American Soto Zen as a whole, not simply to the women of the sect.

### **Methodology**

In addition to a variety of published research from books and articles, a questionnaire, informed by the research questions, provided valuable information on how ritual is used by ordained American women in their practice of Soto Zen (see Appendix B). This project relied on personal interviews with experts who were chosen based on either their work in the field of Zen, their standing as prominent ordained American Soto women and men involved in the Soto Zen tradition, or a combination of the two (see Appendix A).

## **CHAPTER II: HISTORY**

### **Women in Early Buddhism**

After following strict ascetic practices, and nearly dying of starvation, Siddhartha Gautama was offered a piece of rice and ate it. As he began to build up his strength, he realized that extremes of any kind on the body were not going to bring him the enlightenment he sought. Instead, he decided to follow what he called “The Middle Way,” a path of moderation.

According to early scriptures, the Buddha’s core teachings consisted of The Four Noble Truths and The Eightfold Path (Rahula, 1974). As told in his first sermon to his five disciples, The Four Noble Truths are *dukkha*, or suffering, “that which is impermanent;” *samudaya*, “the arising or origin of *dukkha*;” *nirodha*, “the cessation of *dukkha*;” and *magga*, “the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha*” (p. 16). The final truth, *magga*, is the middle way in action and has eight components, known as The Noble

Eightfold Path. These components are: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (Rahula, 1974). “The essence of those many thousand discourses scattered in the Buddhist Scriptures is found in the Noble Eightfold Path” (p. 46).

From these teachings, the potential to end the cycle of suffering and reach enlightenment, or *nirvana*, is available to both women and men, as neither a person’s sex nor caste, which were both major issues in Siddhartha’s India, are mentioned or referred to in the basic tenets. Early Buddhist scriptures reveal that the Buddha, having fully accepted women as equals, taught them throughout his lifetime, despite evidence suggesting that his “cohorts mocked him for this perceived weakness” (Tsomo, 1999). In addition, there is no evidence that the Buddha taught women a different curriculum than men, despite women having different skills and inhabiting different social levels (Schireson, 2009).

Canonical sources, even those with a clear androcentric bias, suggest that women held a prominent place in the early Buddhist communities, not only as practitioners, but also as teachers for other women (Sponberg, 1992). As lay supporters of the Buddha, women played instrumental roles in nurturing the early community and many were accepted as *arhants*, fully liberated people who, using the Buddha’s teaching, freed themselves from the suffering of human existence (Tsomo, 1999). The earliest sutras, besides affirming women’s ability to achieve enlightenment from their practice, go so far as to list the names of individual women who had achieved *nirvana* (Tsomo, 1999).

While the record on lay female followers appears to support women’s practice, the Buddha’s record on monastic or ordained women begins to bring the issue of

women's equality in Buddhism into question. It is known that among the Buddha's female followers were women who gave up their worldly existence to follow him full time (Sponberg, 1992). At this period in history, female "wanderers" as they were called, were not often seen in organized groups in other traditions, with the Jains and Buddhists being the only two sects to most fully acknowledge and organize them (p. 6). While this may seem highly supportive of women, the story surrounding the first female renunciate, Mahaprajapati, the Buddha's aunt, reveals that the Buddha had reservations about allowing women into the *sangha*, or community of monastic people.

Mahaprajapati was initially turned down by the Buddha when she asked to become what was essentially his first female renunciate. Upon a second request, she was also told no. Finally, Ananda, a male friend and follower of the Buddha, felt sorry for her and eventually convinced the Buddha to allow women into the *sangha* ("The Order of Monks and Nuns," n.d.). According to the sutras, the Buddha began allowing women in, but a set of monastic rules, the *Vinaya*, was extended for women, prohibiting them from practices such as "sleeping alone at the base of trees...bathing alone in rivers, rubbing against a monk, or carving a squash into the shape of a penis for use in masturbation," although there were other specific rules that prohibited sexual gratification for both nuns and monks (Tisdale, 2006, p. 10). Though women were now permitted to leave home and stay together in communities known as the *biksuni sangha*, these rules rendered their status completely subordinate to male renunciates ("The Order of Monks and Nuns," n.d.). The extended *Vinaya* may be understood as the beginnings of gender inequality in Buddhism, and though it appears gender-biased, women of the Buddha's day nevertheless took advantage of this new opportunity to become monastics.



There are differing arguments about what the Buddha actually thought once women were in the monastic *sangha*. In one account, the Buddha is alleged to have forecast the decline of the *sangha* (Tsomo, 1999). This evidence would support the notion that the Buddha was reluctant to allow women to join the *sangha* (Tsomo, 1999). However, this evidence must also be scrutinized and “cannot properly be based on scriptural authority...” as the Buddha, according to another source, appears to have “declared the *biksuni sangha* an essential element in a balanced Buddhist society, and provided clear statutes for its establishment and governance” (p. 28).

As scholars note is often the case with religions that stand the test of time, what follows after the Buddha’s death is the institutionalization of an official Buddhist religion with growing gender inequality (Northup, 1997). As the Buddhist community grew and organized, followers “began to speculate about the implications of [the Buddha’s] teachings,” including his teachings on women, with many trying to prove the inferiority of women doctrinally (Sponberg, 1992, p. 13). Early on, “institutional androcentrism” appears to have pervaded the community, with women permitted to pursue a monastic career, “but only within a carefully regulated institutional structure that preserve[d] and reinforce[d] the conventionally accepted social standard of male authority and female subordination...” (p. 13). Despite the fact that the order of nuns produced virtuous and enlightened women, early texts still warned “against the temptations of women” and repeated the alleged prophecy that women’s admission would eventually end Buddhism (Tsomo, 1999, p. 7). By the time Buddhism was developing written canonical literature, the “positive attitude toward women evident among early Buddhists seems to have

sharply declined,” as it was no longer not just monastic women, but women in general who were portrayed in a negative fashion (p. 5).

The Mahayana sect, or “the Great Vehicle,” which developed between 300 BCE and 100 CE, teaches that people should aspire to become a Buddha, and that “such an aspirant is called a bodhisattva...a heroic being utterly committed to attaining full and perfect enlightenment at some future time” (Barnes, 1987, p. 115). Originally, early Mahayanists argued for the spiritual equality of women. However, around the first century CE, followers began to argue that women could not become a Buddha (Barnes, 1987). The other branch of Buddhism, Theravada, also adopted this view.

Woven throughout the Buddhist canon are scriptures that show women to be inferior to men, “less compassionate,...limited in wisdom, and jealous and obstructive by nature” (Tisdale, 2006, p. 7). Mahayana sutras eventually developed the notion of the “five hindrances or obstructions,” defined as the state of “woman” that in and of itself is negative and something that women brought on themselves “through previous negative actions” (Das Gupta, 2009, p. 233).

The notion that women cannot achieve enlightenment is found in many texts that explain that enlightenment in a woman’s body is impossible, and introduce the concept of sexual transformation as the only means by which a woman may achieve Buddhahood; this “requires a woman to change her female body into that of a male” (Sunim, 1999, p. 123). The idea that it is a woman’s unfortunate karma to be born in the body of a female was substantiated early on in Buddhism with the belief that “women’s spiritual practice is somehow less potent or creates less karmic benefit than that of men” (Tsomo, 1999, p.

17). According to Gross (1993), these beliefs are evidence of the “lowered expectations limiting women” that existed in Buddhism’s early days (p. 188).

However, not all scriptures speak negatively of women. Some Mahayana sutras, for example, have female *bodhisattvas*, which seems “to argue for a more equitable attitude toward the sexes” (Barnes, 1987, p. 117). According to Barnes (1987), this argument is “based upon an accurate understanding of the Mahayana doctrine of emptiness” and non-duality, which would imply that gender is irrelevant (p. 117). Understood in light of these principles, the idea that a woman cannot become a Buddha is a contradiction.

Essentially, there is a disparity between the basic Buddhist teachings and the later sutras and practice that evolved and exist today. Within the vast amounts of Buddhist canons are inconsistencies that scholars are still trying to reconcile and explain. While some sources point to women’s ability to attain enlightenment and the Buddha’s acceptance of women’s practice, other sources describe women as “less compassionate than men, limited in wisdom, and jealous and obstructive by nature” (Tisdale, 2006, p. 7). Some scholars believe the negative images of women in both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism may be due to influential Brahmanical or Confucian ideologies, while others think that deeply embedded androcentric cultural beliefs merged with Buddhist doctrine to create an inconsistency in the Buddhist canon when dealing with the subject of women (Tsomo, 1999; Tisdale, 2006). These scholars posit that such rules are a “Buddhist appropriation of prevailing social views regarding gender” (Sponberg, 1992, p. 18).

Whatever the reason may be for this treatment of women, “conflicting images make the study of women in Buddhism complex...[because] there are problems both

authenticating allusions to women in the texts and in discounting the texts altogether” (Tsomo, 1999, pp. 7-8). While the sutras are supposed to be the words of the Buddha, one must keep in mind that much of the literature was written long after the Buddha’s death by subgroups within the Buddhist community who had their own concerns about the direction that the religion should take. This understanding may help explain why the literature involving women is contradictory. However, despite the authenticity of the source for these canons, the literature is “often used to legitimize negative typecasting of women” (p. 7).

Zen Buddhist and scholar Grace Schireson (2009) writes that there are four ways the Buddha’s alleged behavior may be interpreted. The first interpretation is to accept that we, as 21<sup>st</sup> century people, have no real way of understanding the circumstances that the Buddha lived in and therefore the context within which he taught. Thus, one should trust the Buddha’s teachings and not be so concerned with the androcentric bias and anti-female remarks in the texts (p. 7). The second interpretation is that because the Buddha would likely never have been so biased against women, but regardless of the androcentric bent seen in the sutras having been added by later Buddhists, the “teachings should not be questioned” (p. 7). Another similar understanding also maintains that the Buddha would not have said such things and contends that the teachings were added later by less enlightened people. However, Schireson adds here that the “negativity of these remarks” may be addressed with an understanding of the source (p. 7). Finally, Schireson suggests that one may understand that the Buddha, enlightened as he may have been, was still a person dealing with his own karmic and psychological issues and was susceptible to the gender bias of his day (p. 7). She adds that based on this interpretation, “Buddha’s

tendency to objectify women and sexuality as a negative force needs to be considered as we transplant Buddhism to the west” (p. 7).

### **Women in Japanese Buddhism**

In its long history, Buddhism has traversed the Asian continent and found homes in many countries, finding a home in Japan around the 700s. The Buddhist notions questioning a female’s ability to attain Buddhahood and subordinating women to men appear to have come over with the other Buddhist teachings, as Japanese Buddhism has its share of gender inequities. The spread of Buddhism in Japan favored men over women, greatly diminishing women’s roles and creating a negative perception of them within the religious community. The Japanese were especially preoccupied with the concept of female impurity and the many rules that subordinated women reinforced women’s “moral inferiority” that developed from the idea of a polluted female body (Das Gupta, 2009, p. 233). The source of this impurity stems from a “morbid fascination” with women’s menstruation as a hindrance to attaining enlightenment (p. 238). Clearly, there was an underlying Japanese notion that women were “a lower order of being” than men (p. 238). As a result, the biased social and religious stigma that historically suffused the climate of the Buddhist community in Japan prompted members of specific Japanese sects to promote practices that discriminated against women.

This kind of discrimination occurred despite the fact that women made significant contributions in introducing the religion to the country. In fact, it was a woman who established the first Japanese Buddhist temple and women were the first people to be ordained as monastics in Japan (Arai, 1999). Zen scholar Paula Arai (1999) notes that this may not have been seen as a progressive event because the ancient Japanese

indigenous religious and political practices featured women in prominent positions. The shamaness was powerful, both spiritually and politically, and empresses ruled Japan throughout the 300s, 400s, and 500s, lasting until Confusion teachings took root in Japan. Another import, Confusionism, endorsed men as heads of state and women's authority was diminished (P. Arai, personal communication, June 22, 2011). According to Arai, when the first Japanese monastics, Zenshin, Zenzo, and Kensen, who were all women, were ordained, it was not an anomaly because it made sense culturally. It made sense "because the women were the ones who did those kinds of things" (P. Arai, personal communication, June 22, 2011).

Even with the contributions of women in Japanese religious society, several sects in Buddhism made it clear that women, and especially women renunciates, were not welcome in their sects. For example, Shingon sect founder Kukai wrote that "the exclusion of women was an opportunity to preserve the precepts of the clergy" (Haruko, 1998, p. 27). As a result, no women in Japan, to this day, hold the highest rank in this sect. In addition, women were forbidden from going to Mount Koya, "the center of Shingon Buddhism" (Tisdale, 2006, p. 206). Similarly, the center of Tendai Buddhism, Mount Hiei, was also closed to women. In the Zen sect of Rinzai, the practices were not any better. As in the Shingon sect, no woman may hold the highest rank in the sect's hierarchy. A twelfth-century Rinzai Zen monk, Muji Ichien, who wrote on the subject of women, said that while women should "establish [themselves] as follower[s] of the Way," they must also be careful because they "arouse desire in men, are jealous, lack empathy, are only concerned with their appearance, are deceitful, [and] are without shame" (Das Gupta, 2009, p. 229). In keeping with this concept of woman, Ichien

thought that to be born in a defiled female body was the result of “negative past life action” (p. 230). Though Buddhist ideas about women may have been forced into more inclusive practices by modernity, there are still some within the various sects who subscribe to this narrow view of women.

Furthermore, because of these negative images of women in Japan, Buddhist practice for them was not easy. Grace Schireson (2009) has identified six common conditions for female Buddhists in Asia. First, women had to find alternate modes of training because they were not permitted in male monasteries. Added to this was the difficulty of leaving their homes because women had familial obligations and were impeded by laws that made it burdensome. As a result, many Asian Buddhist women developed a serious, albeit personal, practice at home. Schireson (2009) also points out the myriad safety issues “limit[ing] their mobility,” such as the threat of rape and bodily harm that women who left home had to face (p. 41). This potential danger, in turn, limited training and recognition, and allowed less of a chance to have a thriving lineage. Although some wealthy women or those from powerful families managed to receive more well-rounded Buddhist training, overall, women’s lack of education posed a problem for them in studying the sutras and inadvertently legitimized the notion that they had “lesser abilities” than men, and therefore “their teachings were not valued in the community” (p. 41).

While these and many other practices within Buddhism are clearly the result of a male-dominated hierarchy, some scholars have argued that Buddhist women in Asian societies are “actually more independent and self-confident” than women of other religions in Asian society, due to aspects of Buddhism that stress the “rights of women

and supports their spiritual aspirations” (Harris, 1999, p. 49). Paula Arai builds on this argument by explaining the views of modern-day Japanese Soto nuns with whom she spoke “about their perception of themselves and their history” (P. Arai, personal communication, June 22, 2011). These nuns, Arai discovered, “didn’t see the need to stress that women can have power because it was assumed . . . [and as a result] they had a very high sense of themselves” (P. Arai, personal communication, June 22, 2011). Their understanding, she argues, is because of the prominent roles of women in historical, religious Japan. However, a more prevalent view is that women have historically “assumed a subservient position in the sphere of religion,” despite the notion of many that “the male/female distinction is irrelevant to the core of Buddhism” (Tsomo, 1999, p. 17; Harris, 1999, p. 49).

### **Japanese Soto Zen**

Though the androcentric biases that run through Buddhist doctrine appear to commingle with male-dominated cultural tendencies, throughout Buddhist history there have been those who upheld original teachings of egalitarian views and encouraged women’s practice. On this short and important list, arguably the most influential has been the Japanese Soto Zen Master, Dogen. Though orphaned as a young child, Eihei Dogen was born in Kyoto in the year 1200 to a noble family and grew up to become a fascinating character in the landscape of Japanese Zen Buddhism (Tamura, 2000). Deciding not to fulfill his prescribed social position by going to court, Dogen instead chose to enter the monastic world of Buddhism at the age of 13, and tried many different forms of Buddhism and teachers before adopting Soto Zen (Tamura, 2000). He was initially ordained through the Tendai School at Mount Hiei, studying the “doctrine of



original enlightenment” (p. 100). Though he found the basic teachings insightful, he was “dissatisfied with the actual practice” and left after a year to visit the Rinzai monk Eisai at Kennin-ji Temple (p. 100). Still not satisfied with the disciplines available to him in Japan, Dogen traveled to China and met Rujing, who would be his “true teacher” (Tisdale, 2006, p. 206). With Rujing, Dogen received the “transmission of the Ts’ao-tung (Soto) sect” in 1223 (Tamura, 2000, p. 99).

By 1227, Dogen had decided to return to Japan to teach what he believed was the true Buddhism, and a Buddhism that, he thought, the Japanese did not yet understand (Tisdale, 2006). Dogen considered Soto Zen to be the “original heart of Buddhism” as it bases its teachings on “innate wisdom uncovered through meditation and declared itself not dependent on sutras or the written word” (Tisdale, 2006, p. 206; Schireson, 2009, p. 9). It is said that in Zen, when a person has found enlightenment, he or she no longer needs the teachings, not even the Noble Truths or the Eightfold Path. In fact, an enlightened person doesn’t even need the Buddha (Kurtz, 2007).

Within the religious community of 13<sup>th</sup> century Kyoto, Dogen was widely known for his unconventional approach to Buddhism, as well as his often shocking personality. He was notable for being “impolite, cranky and sarcastic, and he insulted priests of other sects without hesitation” (Tisdale, 2006, p. 206). Scholars write that Dogen acted this way because he was “tired of the rounds of ignorant remarks by . . . visitors, [and] irritated by the complaints of high-ranking priests who disliked his free ways, his willingness to mingle, and his lack of decorum” (p. 209).

Behind this large personality was a monk interested in understanding why so many people were unsuccessful in opening up to their Buddha nature (p. 206). Dogen

saw a non-dual relationship and connection between seemingly opposing positions—“ordinary people and the Buddha, practice and enlightenment, mind and body” (Tamura, 2000, p. 100). To realize the ultimate truth of this non-dual relationship, Dogen advocated the practice of *zazen*, seated meditation. Through *zazen*, Dogen found an expansive internal space where nothing could interfere with anything else, and where concepts of jealousy, class, or gender could not exist (Tisdale, 2006).

Stemming from this experiential philosophy, Dogen taught without propounding dogma or doctrine and refused to classify people by class or gender. While many Chinese masters had expressed similar sentiments earlier in history, Dogen was pivotal in paving the Japanese path toward Buddhist equality in the medieval period by stating “unequivocally that enlightenment and Buddhist accomplishment was possible for everyone,” often shouting with emphasis the koan, “*All being is Buddha Nature!*” (p. 207). In several speeches that Dogen gave his students, he made his egalitarian views clear:

Stupid people think women are the cause of sexual greed. What’s wrong with women? What’s so right about men? Do you think the Dharma depends on such things? And this crazy idea of enclosed grounds, where women aren’t allowed—whose crazy idea was that? What kind of temple has no women? (p. 210)

In these speeches, Dogen also made it clear that he fully supported women’s involvement in monastic life. He told his students:

When a nun who knows the truth and has the Dharma presents herself to the world, those who want the Dharma should listen. Anyone who wants to learn will

submit to her teaching. Many people are so ignorant, they refuse to listen to women, even when women who are teachers are their elders. Any person who has got the Dharma is a true Buddha. (p. 209)

In an attempt to create what he saw to be the perfect Buddhist monastic life during a tumultuous period in Japan, Dogen eventually moved from the city to the mountains, with a small group of students, both male and female, where he established the monastery Eihei-ji. There, he hoped to practice the “pure standards of Zen,” teaching men and women, side by side (p. 2). On one side of the temple’s main entrance gate he had inscribed: “Anyone with a sincere desire to practice Buddhism can enter this gate freely” (p. 2). Dogen eventually died at Eihei-ji after battling an illness; however, before his death he appointed a monk named Ejo as his successor, but added that a prominent nun, Egi, was Ejo’s Dharma sister and “the Dharma sister of all the men there,” thereby promoting the equal practice of women beyond his own generation (p. 211).

Scholars question whether toward the end of his life Dogen kept his egalitarian views or if he might have begun to change his mind. He became extremely concerned with establishing a sectarian lineage and with this, his attention was drawn away from sermons on equality, both gender-based and between laymen and monastics. According to records, his final thoughts on reaching enlightenment promote monastic life over lay practice. For Dogen, ordination “had the quasi-magical power to cancel all human flaws,” gender based or not (Faure, 1999, p. 136).

One of Dogen’s indirect successors, Keizan Jokin Zenji (1268-1325), became the second-most important figure in the history of Japanese Soto Zen as a beacon of change and champion of tradition. Keizan was instrumental in making Dogen’s monastic Soto

Zen more available to the laity and continued Dogen's legacy of equality in teaching and ordaining women (Arai, 1999, p. 42). In the world of Soto Zen, if Dogen is the father, Keizan is considered the movement's mother, which expresses "something of his nurturing tenderness toward the underdogs—women and lay followers" (Schireson, 2009, p. 83).

Keizan's support of lay practice makes him an innovator in Soto Zen. Where for Dogen renunciation meant a strict adherence to a monastic lifestyle, Keizan believed renunciation could be both physical and spiritual or simply spiritual. He, unlike Dogen, did not feel that traditional monasticism was the only route to enlightenment. Such an innovative way of teaching renunciation is, according to Arai, "at the root of Soto Zen's impulse to accommodate various situations and accept the need to change in accord with the changing needs of the monastic and lay community" (Arai, 1999, p. 22).

Under Dogen and his descendants, like Keizan, five generations of women taught their own students in an unbroken line (Tisdale, 2006). Keizan's immediate lineage saw women as fully ordained Zen masters with the same authority as men to lead major ceremonies and ordain others, thus creating their own lineage (Tisdale, 2006). In fact, his first Dharma transmission was to a woman and Keizan appears to have ordained around 30 nuns under his tutelage, and even ordained husband and wife units (Arai, 1999). By 1334, there were so many nuns in the sect that they formed the *Soto-she Nisodan*, or the Soto Nun's Association (Arai, 1999). Among other goals, they hoped to establish training monasteries specifically for nuns. However, the social and political turmoil that ensued in the century that followed undid the important steps that the nuns

had made. Not only did their lineages not survive and their hopes for a nunnery shatter, but the sect eventually began adopting practices that reflected the prevailing social attitude of the time instead of the egalitarian teachings of Dogen and Keizan.

While Dogen is now considered to be one of Japan's greatest philosophic teachers, for 700 years after he died, he was not widely read outside his sect (Tanahashi, 1985). Even within his sect, however, Dogen's teachings were forgotten between 1400 and 1800 CE. His own sect did not even publish his most important work, "The Treasury of the Dharma Eye" until 1818 (p. 23). The result of Dogen's teachings being forgotten manifested in the evolution of the Soto sect's unfair treatment of monastic women. Rules were established that made it difficult for nuns to both get the proper training and advance within the sect. Perhaps most blatantly against Dogen's wishes, women were forbidden to practice at Eihei-ji. Unfortunately, though not officially, not long after Dogen and Keizan, Eihei-ji became a temple devoted to training monks. Even today, Eihei-ji is almost exclusively the domain of monks and male priests (Arai, 1999).

Up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were no training facilities for nuns that were "supported or authorized by the sect administration" (p. 50). Likewise, no nuns were permitted to attend the Soto school's university, Komazawa (p. 50). When nuns did receive training for monastic life, they were expected to study for up to five years longer than monks. The nuns saw no return for this extra training, but instead were granted degrees in which the highest they could achieve was lower than the monks' lowest degree. In keeping with this practice was the rule that nuns could not attain a middle to high rank in the hierarchy "because they were not permitted to receive the requisite

monastic or secular education for the higher ranking positions,” regardless of their level of practice (p. 49). As a result, nuns could only wear the black robe of a novice and not one that reflected their true level of practice or study. The asymmetric treatment of nuns allowed monks to keep the sizable and influential temples under their control, thereby keeping nuns out of the sect’s financial system that would eventually, towards the end of the twentieth century, become a remunerative venture (p. 50). The nuns of the early twentieth century decided that they wanted to be “officially allowed to participate in the decision making process of sect affairs,” and since this ability was granted based on rank, they needed equal status to monks within their sect (p. 50).

Dogen’s egalitarian philosophy may have been disregarded within the male population of the Soto school, but for the nuns of the sect, Dogen’s teachings have and continue to play a prominent role in their monastic lives. Through the 19th century, Soto nuns practiced their own interpretation of Soto Zen based on Dogen’s teachings, though their institution did not support them, and they did not have equal opportunities for education, training, or teaching. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the nuns decided to put an end to their unfair treatment within the sect and reclaim the rightful equality that their sect’s acknowledged founder, Dogen, had initially recognized in them. Dogen’s teachings were therefore used as a means of both empowering the nuns in their campaign for equality and as a confirmation of legitimacy and authenticity for the nuns in presenting their case. Some of the rights the nuns fought to reclaim included: having the authority to name dharma heirs, the right to have an education and participate in affairs of the sect, the right to be appointed as heads of temples, and the right to be appointed as teachers within the various levels of the sect’s hierarchy (p. 67). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup>

century, the Soto Zen nuns of Japan continued their campaign for equality because they wanted to be “as effective as possible as monastics” (p. 50).

### **Soto Zen in America**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, while the Soto nuns in Japan were interested in being effective monastics and were waging a campaign for equality, others within the Zen community were focusing on the importance not of monastic life, but on making the tradition more accessible to the laity (Stuart, 1992). Soyen Shaku, the Rinzai monk who was the first Zen priest to visit the U.S. during the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago, felt that Japanese Zen had “been zapped of true spiritual inquiry” and sought to restore a sense of honest Zen exploration that he felt was lacking in the Japanese temples. He believed that the American landscape was ripe for the introduction of Zen and could perhaps restore it with a sense of honest spiritual pursuit (Tworkov, 1994, p. 3). Though Soyen was eager to bring Zen to America, many of his fellow monks argued that “the land of the white barbarians [was] beneath the dignity of a Zen master” (p. 3). Nevertheless, with “diplomatic discretion” Soyen presented Japanese Zen to the West (Tworkov, 1994, p. 3; Levering & Schireson, 2006).

Soyen Shaku’s teacher, Kosen, wanted his disciples to have open minds and so he had them attend universities to learn about other religions and philosophies, different parts of the world, and other languages. Kosen was interested in Western culture, so it is no surprise that Soyen was so well prepared for his historic trip to the States (Stuart, 1992). Soyen would return to America in 1905, this time visiting San Francisco and staying with Mrs. Alexander Russell, who became the first Zen student in the States (p. 13). As many Americans welcomed the new Zen tradition, more Japanese priests came

over to teach, and a budding Soto Zen community began to take shape. Among the first influential teachers was Shunryu Suzuki (1904-1971), (no relation to D.T. Suzuki), who came over in 1959. He would later open the San Francisco Zen Center, a highly influential establishment that has several other practice centers under its direction. Perhaps most well know and important is Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, the first Buddhist monastery in the U.S. (Levering & Schireson, 2006).

Another important figure in early American Zen was Taizan Maezumi (1931-1995). He arrived at Zenshuji in 1959, which was started in 1922 and by that time, was the North American Soto sect headquarters in Los Angeles (Levering & Schireson, 2006). Though he has left a lineage, his time in the States was marked by alcohol abuse and sexual relationships with his students, the later causing him to loose many female members of his *sangha* (Levering & Schireson, 2006). Nevertheless, before his death in the late 90's, Maezumi Roshi was active in developing the Soto Zen Buddhist Association, a group designed to unite those teachers with ties to the Soto tradition by providing support and a common set of training standards to practice (Levering & Schireson, 2006). In North America, it represents most of the Soto Zen lineages of Japanese descendants, and has as its parent organization, the Japanese Sotoshu headquarters (Levering & Schireson, 2006).

Among Suzuki Roshi, Maezumi Roshi, and other early Zen teachers' pupils were many Americans, most of them coming from a "predominantly white and middle or upper middle class" backgrounds (Mrozik, 2008, p. 2). Of this group, many were women. In fact, since its introduction to the U.S., women have practiced along with male teachers and students, and many women have become prominent figures in the



community. Jean Ross was an early American Zen pioneer who studied with Suzuki Roshi. She became “one of the first Westerners and the first woman of any nationality to study” at Dogen’s Eihiji temple, participating in the extended seven month training period (Levering & Schireson, 2006, p. 641).

Elise Mitchell is another woman who made an impression on the American Zen landscape. She left the states in the 60s to study Soto in Japan with a prominent Japanese teacher named Rindo Fujimoto. Her publication of one of his lectures on *zazen*, “The Way of Zazen” became the first English translation guide on Soto style meditation (Levering & Schireson, 2006). Before she left for her training in the 60s, Mitchell and her husband established the Cambridge Buddhist Meditation Society in the late 50s (Levering & Schireson, 2006).

Another important female figure in early American Zen was Peggy Jiyu Kennet. Though of British nationality, Kennet moved to California after her Soto training in Japan and became the first female Zen teacher to be recognized by the Soto headquarters in Japan. She later became the first woman to found her own temple, Shasta Abbey, in California (Levering & Schireson, 2006). There she experimented with combining Zen and liturgical forms from the Church of England (Levering & Schireson, 2006). This may be among the first hybridizations of American Soto Zen to be developed and explored.

While men tended to outnumber women in most early Zen communities, photos of early Zen retreats reveal that middle aged women participated in large numbers (Tworkov, 2008). Tworkov (2008) explains that the idea of sitting down to meditate, to “do nothing,” may have appeared to be more of a woman’s venture, despite Zen’s

reputation as a masculine practice (p. 95). The Beat writers of the late 40s and 50s increased Zen's visibility, promoting it as more of a philosophy than as a religion (Levering & Schireson, 2006). As a result, early American Zen men may have been studying Zen, more than practicing *zazen*.

The women's movements in the 70s and 80s fostered a nurturing environment for women to come together to practice Buddhism in a female centered way. During the 80s, discussion groups and conferences were prevalent with titles such as "Feminist Principles in Zen" and "Women in American Buddhism" (Levering & Schireson, 2006). The first symposium on Women and Buddhism was held in 1982 and was such a success that it became an annual event thereafter (Sidor, 1987). Women were coming together to better understand their historical place in the tradition, and to find ways to balance out the male dominated history, thus "reclaiming the equality of the sexes in the Buddhadharmā" (Macy, 1987, p. 101). They were dealing with working within the limits of a "predominantly male dominated and male defined" religion and therefore often found themselves "intimidated by the environment" and "struggl[ing] for recognition" (Boucher, 1993, 92). Furthermore, women's concerns still had to revolve around finding ways to integrate formal practice into their lives while still participating in daily activities including raising children. Adding to the difficulty of finding a balance was the lack of flexibility and knowledge in Zen centers and semi-monastic communities in regards to the demands of raising a family (Sidor, 1987).

Nevertheless, American Soto women found their inclusion in the religion was more equitable than in other sects such as Tibetan or Theravada Buddhism. Today in the U.S., women receive the same ordination and titles as men and many women have forged

ahead in the tradition to assume positions of authority within the American Soto Zen community, some even “achieving the title of ‘roshi,’ which is conferred by a master only upon his most worthy disciples” (Boucher, 1993, p. 92). American women have made a substantial impact on Soto Zen, despite many claims that there are still gender issues to be dealt with.

The literature examined for this study revealed that women have had to reconcile the negative images of their gender in Buddhism almost since its inception. Within Soto Zen, Dogen took important steps toward securing women’s equality with men, but because this did not last, Japanese nuns had to work to regain these original rights and equal standing back.

Furthermore, women have been active participants in American Soto Zen from its early days in the U.S., learning from teachers whose lineages are the foundation of American Soto Zen. In part because of the fervor of the Women’s Movement, women came together to support each other, help reconcile inequalities, and move forward into a new era of Zen Buddhism in the West. Because Soto Zen is relatively new to the U.S. and women are on the front lines of the tradition, much of the tradition, with regard to gender issues is being re-examined.

### **CHAPTER III: WOMEN IN SOTO ZEN**

#### **Feminist Views on Buddhism**

The basis for Buddhist practice is dependent not on male or female embodiment, but on seeing the truth of our human existence—the absolute reality of impermanence, absence of inherent or separate self, the unsatisfactoriness of experience based solely on materialistic goals, and the inherent freedom that is the

birthright of all human beings. All schools of Buddhism agree that this basis is irrefutable. (Schireson, 2009, p. 233)

Yet, even with these basic ideas agreed upon, there still exists "a massive...conflict between view and practice" in much of the Buddhist world (Gross, 1993, p. 211).

Despite the egalitarian basis of Buddhism, throughout its history women and their accomplishments "have been erased," scriptures have been written describing women "hatefully," and "because of the eight special rules, [Buddhist women] have been in a submissive position" to male Buddhists ([Interview with Schireson], 2010, p. 46).

However, Schireson stresses that the issue of gender in Buddhism is not coming from angry feminists pointing fingers and making a big deal of something small and insignificant (2010). Rather, as Gross (2009) puts it: "Buddhism's overall record on gender is its greatest failing, its most obvious blemish" (p. 247). In fact, despite these egalitarian teachings, "Buddhism's record on gender equality is not significantly better than any other religion" (p. 210). If the basic teachings do not "support gender inequality or gender hierarchy," then Buddhists and scholars must reconcile this polarity within a clearly genderized tradition that, nonetheless, asks its followers to see beyond gender (Gross, 1993, p. 209).

Here, it is helpful to define exactly what gender is. Most people are born as a particular sex, usually clearly male or female--a biological category based on anatomy. Gender, however, is not as easily recognized because it is "created and sustained by what people do, how they act, what they wear, [and] how they speak, all of which signify 'maleness' or 'femaleness'" (DeRogatis, 2004, p. 198). Gender designates *who* people are,

not *what* people are, and who they are is shaped at an early age by societal influences (Kurtz, 2007, p. 233).

According to Kurtz (2007), a female's "lifelong socialization process" is affected early in her life by religious limitations that often impose an inferior status on young girls (p. 233). The imposition of status and subsequent treatment by society becomes internalized by young girls and consequently affects a girl's, and later a women's, self-image (p. 233). Therefore, gender issues within Buddhism must be understood as occurring within the context of a given society that gives shape to a person's experience of the world.

Nevertheless, in Buddhism, as in many religions where men have been at the forefront, women have maintained "their own perspectives" (Falk & Gross, 2009, p. xv). Since Buddhism's inception, women have been making their voices heard with Mahaprajapati, the Buddha's aunt and first ordained woman in his *sangha*, pushing for the inclusion of all women in the *sangha*. Later in Japan, when the Soto nuns were not treated equally to the monks, this group of women also pushed for more egalitarian practices. According to Das Gupta (2009), the limitations imposed on women are the result of the association of females with flesh and the carnal. Therefore, in Buddhism, as in other religions, the real issue is not "religious," but "male" (p. 231).

In an attempt to "explain and justify" the negative images of, and practices against, women in Buddhism, various positions have been proposed (Gross, 1993, p. 210). One justification of these practices involves the idea of *karma*, which includes the person's actions and the effects of their past lives on the "actions and their effects in this life and lives to come," (Fisher, 2008, p. 534). Here, women are understood as not having been

given the same "Buddha embryo" as men from which to find enlightenment, because of some previous negative action (Gross, 1993, p. 188). In response, Gross points out, this explanation of *karma* as a "pan-Indian and pre-Buddhist idea" adds another layer of suspicion, because this idea comes out of "socially created patriarchal institutions" that were used to hold people back from upward mobility (p. 188).

Tisdale (2006) also discusses gender as *karma*, but instead of using it to demean women, reframes it. She explains that a person comes into this world having a sex, but is shaped by her experiences, which therefore create her gender (Tisdale, 1996, p. 16). An individual's experience in this world and the karma that it accumulates, not the effects of the actions of the individual's past being, is what makes gender. Since Tisdale is defining gender as something that is shaped by people's experience in the world, "maleness" has no superiority to "femaleness" in the karmic hierarchy.

Perhaps the most often repeated Buddhist axiom about gender is that "gender is irrelevant...the enlightened mind is neither male nor female" (Gross, 2009, p. 245). This argument is heard within Buddhism at large and within the smaller Zen community which "was established on the core teachings that view all phenomenal appearance as empty of fixed substance," with "no essential difference in the spiritual experience available to all human beings, regardless of sex, race, or gender" despite historically being an all male tradition"(Schireson, 2009, p. 3).

Schireson (2009) explains the contradiction in the teaching by emphasizing that treating men and women differently "is to act as though gender *were* permanent, eternal, with intrinsic identity" (p. 6). This mode of dealing with gender is similar to the Buddhist methodology for addressing self or ego as constructs that Buddhists want to dismantle,

but find difficult because of the innate attachment to them despite the paradoxical knowledge that they do not exist on their own (Gross, 2009, p. 261).

Dogen said: "To forget the self, it is first necessary to study the self" (Gross, 2009, p. 261). For Gross, the key to the question of gender in Buddhism echoes Dogen's views on the ego and self—namely, that we must study it in order to "figure out how to forget it rather than strengthening it further" (p. 262). To let go of attachments, practitioners must first recognize, name, and understand what it is they are attached to. Only then can anyone know what it is they want to move away from. Ignoring gender, Gross says, will "only make things worse," in the same way that ignoring the ego in Buddhism impedes the recognition of what it is and the role it plays in a person's life (p. 262). Gross goes on to argue that it does no good to "forget the self if one is always remembering gender," and questions whether forgetting the self is even attainable when there is so much emphasis placed on gender (p. 261).

Gross and other female Buddhist scholars reject the notion that all they want to do is focus on gender. In fact, Gross (2009) wants to move beyond gender, but finds that others in the tradition keep making it an issue by not allowing changes to the tradition that would make it more gender-neutral (p. 246). But "spiritual generalizations," such as *karma* or enlightenment being beyond gender, that subjugate women are for Buddhist and feminist activist Christina Feldman "habits of aversion and fear to hide behind...[that don't] actually address the reality of people's lives" ([Interview with Feldman], 2010, p. 46). For Feldman, justifications such as these don't "have any real meaning" (p. 46).

To further reconcile the relationship between Buddhism and gender, it is helpful to distinguish between the concepts of conventional and ultimate reality, just as the Buddha

is said to have done (Mrozik, 2008). A conventional reality "acknowledges the fact that living beings are enormously diverse," and that a trait of this diversity is a person's gender (p. 14). While a person has gender, the "unborn" is not gendered, and the conventional understanding of reality permits this distinction (Noble, 2010, p. 149).

On the other hand, the ultimate reality perspective "insists that we are all the same since we share a common Buddha nature" (Mrozik, 2008, p. 14). This is where the argument that enlightenment is beyond gender comes into play. To balance these seemingly opposing views, a "combining [of] accountability" is called for that would allow for both an ultimate perspective of a unifying Buddha nature without becoming complacent in dealing with gender issues, while at the same time acknowledging an individual's uniqueness without falling into the trap of gender stereotyping (as cited in Mrozik, 2008, p. 14). Gross (2009) further cautions about gender stereotyping, pointing out the usefulness of a "lightly held generalization" in navigating within the world, but warning against the use of "rigidly held doctrine[s] about differences between women and men which must be enforced at any cost, even deforming individuals emotionally to make them fit gender expectations that have been laid out for them" (p. 259).

The idea that Zen is beyond gender is a foundational belief with merit, but nevertheless, practitioners of the religion cannot help but be gendered and proceed on their paths to enlightenment within their gendered bodies. As Tisdale (2006) has said: "We are born in a maze of body and mind, made into *men* and *women* by our culture. We make each other men and women by our experience" (p. 16). By combining the conventional and ultimate perspectives of reality, it may be said that though moving beyond gender is an ultimate Buddhist goal, the path to getting there involves being a



gendered person in a gendered society. Acknowledging this stance allows women to look at themselves and their practice in terms of being women.

Many Buddhist female teachers have spoken about the "roles that their own gender and their awareness of gender differences have played in the development of their practice and teaching styles" (Levering & Schireson, 2006, p. 642). Though societal and religious institutions often send out subjugating messages, Boucher (1993) reminds women that "being women who do a Buddhist practice does not mean that we need be fools, doormats, or victims; that we cannot move to change the conditions of our lives" (p. 5). A woman's recognition of her own gender, "in being fully *here* in [her] experience" states Boucher, "offers an opportunity for women to see and act skillfully in [their] own behalf" (p. 5).

Furthermore, for many Buddhist and Zen Buddhist women, staying in the tradition and working from within for gender equality is important. As Schireson explains, many women "converted to Buddhism because [they] thought it was a superior practice and religion, and [they] don't like seeing that it has the same flaws as other religions. We tend to want to idealize it" ([Interview with Schireson], 2010, p. 46). But these female Buddhists understand that to make change, light must be shed on the issues, and though approaching the issues from outside the religion is one, perhaps less emotionally charged, method, working from within can generate deeper change. Gross (2009) has chosen to work from within Buddhism and urges other women to do so, if they can, explaining that "genuine spiritual breakthroughs are so rare that completely rejecting traditional religions

because they are tainted by patriarchy is fairly dangerous spiritually and may leave one more bereft than ever" (p. 210).

### **Feminism in the U.S.**

To a great degree, American women's current views on Buddhism and gender, and their insistence on discussing these issues, are the result of first- and second-wave Feminism, which championed the rights of women and has tended to focus on the question: "Why is the condition of women as it is today?" (Bynum, 1992, p. 270).

Bynum writes that feminism "arises from the concern with the asymmetrical treatment of women in modern scholarship and modern life," adding that different emphases have emerged within different time periods (p. 270). For example, the "modern life" she speaks of dates back to the first wave of American feminism in the late 19th century. During this time, women were most concerned with the right to vote, which they thought would, by extension, lead to greater equality in the political, social, and economic spheres (Crawford & Unger, 2004, p. 4). The campaign for voting rights succeeded in achieving the signing in 1848 of the Seneca Falls Declaration, rejecting "the doctrine of female inferiority then taught by academics and clergy" that "openly discriminated against" women (p. 4). Despite its success in bringing about this shift, by the 1920s, the first wave of the feminist movement had "lost momentum" in terms of its effects on religion and worship (p. 4).

The 1960s saw a re-emergence of the women's movement, possibly as a reaction to the strict gender roles of the '50s that relegated women to positions as wives and mothers, removing them from their responsibilities in the work place which had, during the war years, kept the country going. By the '60s and early '70s, both sexes were involved in

the women's movement as the prevalent gender arrangements that limited women were obvious to both women and men (Gross, 2009, p. 289). According to Bynum (1992), as a result of this reaction against prescribed gender roles, this period tended to "emphasize the similarity of men and women" (p. 270). Not surprisingly, this time period was fertile ground for the emerging Buddhist doctrines of non-duality and emptiness that gave women an alternate approach to religion that was not defined by a male-centered godhead and instead focused on enlightenment as beyond gender.

Women continued to make strides in the professional, political, and social arenas throughout the '70s. In the '80s, the media claimed "that equal rights had been fully achieved [and] declared feminism outdated" (Crawford & Unger, 2004, p. 11). In fact, the term "feminist" became something rather negative, as it conjured up images of angry, man-hating women (Crawford & Unger, 2004). While there are many branches of feminism, some of which may indeed espouse resentment toward men, the majority view of mainstream feminism reflected the opinion that women are "important and worthwhile human beings," and furthermore, that a feminist is one who believes that "social change to benefit women is needed" (p. 8).

Notwithstanding that social change has taken many forms throughout the various waves of the American women's movement, it has always been, as feminist and Buddhist scholar bell hooks notes, "a movement to end sexism and sexist oppression" (as cited in Crawford & Unger, 2004, p. 8). Ideas of how this work is to be done continue to vary. For instance, some groups advocate for a complete breakdown of prescribed gender qualities, wanting to do away with anything that says that women and men are essentially different; others want to acknowledge men and women's differences, not to value one

group over another, but to celebrate the unique characteristics of the sexes (Crawford & Unger, p. 2004). Thus, feminism and gender equality have taken and continue to take different forms in this country, but still arise from the basic belief that “women are valuable” and social change is needed for women to “lead secure and satisfying lives” (p. 8).

### **The Influence of American Feminism on Japanese Soto Zen Nuns**

The women’s movement had a tremendous impact on the lives of women in America throughout the twentieth century, and after the opening of Japan in the Meiji Era (1868-1912), the American women’s movement had an indirect effect on Japan. The Meiji government, interested in the Westernization of the country, issued many edicts that enhanced women’s lives, even if they were still seen primarily as wives and mothers (Midori, 1998).

Perhaps the most important gain for women was the push by the emperor and empress for women to be educated. The newfound interest in education was meant to benefit the nation. The Meiji era’s Ministry of Education regarded schooling as an important means of molding “ethical wives and mothers who led by example in the family and civil society” (Molony, 2000, p. 644). Intelligence was seen as a desirable trait for a person who was to raise children. As a result, this period saw the institution of secondary schools for girls (Midori, 1998). Nevertheless, while attendance was compulsory, girls did not receive the same education as boys. The curriculum was “not the academic equal” of that in the boys’ schools, “and in no way prepared female students for entrance to the higher schools or universities” (Nolte & Hastings, 1991, p. 158). Instead, young women were taught about cultivating “refined taste and [a] modest

character,” and given no more than they needed to properly perform the required domestic duties (p. 158). To account for this shortcoming, many women were encouraged to leave the country and study abroad, suggesting that a more well-rounded education was accessible and perhaps encouraged (Arai, 1999, p. 46).

Though the Meiji government was officially against women’s liberation movements, with the introduction of Western ideas came the unavoidable inclusion of Western feminist thought, and this more egalitarian thinking “resonated with the roots of women’s spirituality in Japan,” where women historically held authority (Arai, 1999, 46). Arai writes that the influence of the American women’s movement “served as a catalyst during this time of change [and]...empowered and inspired the women of Japan to reclaim their authority” (p. 46). Gross (2009) also acknowledges that the push for more gender equality by Buddhist women in Asian countries like Japan is, at least in part, the result of Western feminism (p. 247). The spread of Western feminist ideas no doubt encouraged the Soto Zen nuns of Japan to assemble and advance their campaign for equality within their sect.

### **Japanese Soto Zen Nuns’ Fight for Equality**

The Soto Zen nuns in Nagoya, Japan, “are a leading example of the educational, occupational, and social advancements that Japanese women have made during this century” (Arai, 1999, p. 158). To show the male authorities in the sect that they should be fully recognized as equal monastics, the nuns employed tactical strategies in their battle. One such strategy was to prove their legitimacy as monastics to the monks by maintaining a strictly traditional lifestyle, making them beyond reproach. This included utilizing both traditional monastic and traditional Japanese cultural practices, both of

which also fed into the Meiji Era endorsement of traditional Japanese cultural activities (p. 46).

The other major strategy that the nuns engaged in to reclaim their rights was education, the great equalizer, which also corresponded with Meiji era proclamations. As John Stewart Mill, whose ideas were imported to Japan in the late 1880s, phrased it: “Improved education [is] a way for women to gain the subjectivity that would make them eligible for rights” (as cited in Molony, 2000, p. 643). The nuns viewed a lack of education as the “fundamental link [in] the vicious cycle” of discrimination and therefore, education as key in “becoming effective participants in the sect” (Arai, 1999, p. 52 & 60).

Even with the inherent gender discrimination of the Meiji educational model, the Soto nuns drew upon the national fervor for education to help them implement their own educational regulations. In the late 1880s, the nuns began to combine their monastic training with secular education (Arai, 1999, p. 50). They saw the secular component of monastic training as essential to functioning within and being respected by society, and to that end, designed the curriculum for female students to exceed the gendered standards that were required by law (p. 53).

Ultimately, the nuns’ battle for fair education within their sect split into several fronts. First, in 1902, the nuns fought for, and won, the right to award degrees that would be officially recognized by both the sect administration and the Ministry of Education. The nuns then petitioned for raising the level of education that they were entitled to from the equivalent of junior high school to college level. They regained that right and in addition, had the monks help fund these new educational initiatives (Arai, 1999, p. 64). The nuns eventually established three autonomous monasteries, one of which was

Tokubetsu Nisodo, or the Special Advanced Monastery for Monastic Women, with the intent of training women to be eligible for the same ranks as monks.

The final victory in educational equality came with the opening up of the sect's prestigious Komazawa University to women. Through education, the Soto nuns produced generations of monastic women who "thought carefully about what needed to be done . . . [and] who knew how to dismantle the male power structure" that had previously held them back (Arai, 1999, p. 63). Education was the first and essential step toward gaining equality in their sect.

During the later years of the nuns' fight for equality in educational practices, they also engaged in challenging other unfair practices of their sect. At the helm of this crusade was the *Soto-shu Nisodan*, the Soto Sect Nuns' Organization, which was re-established in 1944 for the purpose of addressing the needs of the nuns (Arai, 1999). Slowly but surely, this organization helped the nuns regain the rights they had enjoyed before the unequal practices of the previous decades had been institutionalized, by making specific demands on sect authorities. They called for the recognition of their right to designate Dharma heirs, participate in sect administration, have appointments in all ranks of teaching, and be granted the positions of heads of temples (p. 67).

After World War II, as women were granted more rights in Japanese society, the sect leaders began reinstating the rights that the nuns had been seeking for more than twenty years. The sect administration eventually granted them the right to "designate their disciples as their Dharma heirs," participate in official sect matters, and attain teaching degrees equal to that of monks (Arai, 1999, p. 70). "They had autonomy of decision making in administering their own monaster[ies]," and were allowed to move

their census records to their own temples to show proof of their status and allow them to be recognized for their achievements (p. 62). Before then, the nuns had been granted no access to the records of their work.

In addition, across the board, the nuns' ranks were raised to those of the monks and they were permitted to wear the robe color that corresponded to that new rank, instead of the previously dictated robe color of a novice (Arai, 1999). In 1953, the nuns were finally granted appointments as "head of full-rank temples," positions which had previously been held only by men (p. 70). Their new integration allowed the nuns access to financial resources, as these temples had many lay supporters (p. 70). Over the next three decades, the Soto nuns exemplary practice gained them the support of their peers and their communities. Finally, according to The Soto Sect Administration, 1989 was the year that the nuns achieved complete equality with the men in the sect. By the end of the twentieth century, the Soto Zen nuns of Japan had won all of the rights that they had fought for.

### **American Soto Zen Women**

Rita Gross (2009) has argued that if Buddhism and meditation had come over to the U.S. in the 1950s, women's roles in Buddhism would be very different. The second-wave feminism of the '60s and '70s is, she asserts, at least in part to thank for women's success in American Buddhism. Without second-wave feminism, women would have had a very different place in the emerging landscape, probably "staging bake sales rather than meditating and studying side by side with men" (p. 289). The spirit of feminism gave American women "inner authority [to] change the ways of power and leadership in the Buddhist world" (Goodman, 2000, p. 173).



American women in the Soto Zen sect of Buddhism also owe a debt of gratitude to the nuns of Nagoya, Japan, because without the nuns' campaign for equality, American Soto Zen women would probably be in a very different position of authority. This is best illustrated by Theravadin and Tibetan traditions, where even today, although women are visible, they have not been given full equality with men as equals within their sects. By the time Soto came over to the states, the nuns had already begun their campaign and change was being made. The freedom and equality in Soto Zen that American women enjoy is the result of the Japanese nuns' difficult battle. Part of the impetus for the nuns to stand up and be heard is the result of American feminism. The two movements came together in America to result in American Soto women's complete official equality with Soto men.

Though women were officially equal, gender issues still loomed in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Soto Zen that affected both Japanese and American Soto women. Female American priest Jiyu Kennet Roshi, who was among the first American women to study and take ordination in Japan, says "you could officially become a [Soto] priest, but you didn't do it in public because that would mean that the emperor would have to recognize that a woman existed. So, you paid him four times the price that a man did to get the certificate, and you did it in private" (Boucher, 1993, p. 137). Her teacher "forced the issue" in Japan by ordaining Kennet Roshi in public and on tape, "for the benefit of women in his country" (p. 137).

Although great strides have been made in both American feminist movements and within the Soto sect, as "efforts continue to be expended to equalize all elements of [the] tradition," modern American Soto women nevertheless warn that there are still

underlying gender issues that need to be addressed both in Japan and in the U.S. (P. Bennage, personal communication, March, 7, 2011). For Rita Gross (2010), the big question in American Buddhism has always been, “Are there female teachers?” ([Interview with Gross], p. 39). Currently, male Japanese priests “vastly outnumber” female monastics in Japan (P. Bennage, personal communication, March, 7, 2011). On the other hand, in the States, almost half of all Dharma teachers are women. Within Soto, “the female priesthood may [even] be slightly more numerous” (P. Bennage, personal communication, March, 7, 2011).

However, when the fine points of who is teaching are considered, gender issues arise. For example, Gross (2009) points out that in a recent issue of *BuddhaDharma* magazine, “thirteen teachers were pictured in ads for dharma programs they were leading; twelve of them were men” (p. 282). Within Buddhism at large, Gross finds, “the most respected and authoritative teachers are men” and women tend to teach “at the lower ranks” (p. 282). Tsomo adds that women in Zen centers and monasteries tend to fall into roles of “organization, translation, communication, food preparation, public relations, and other support functions” for the male teachers (Mrozik, 2008, p. 10). Speaking as a member of the Soto Zen community, Schireson feels that this disproportionate number carries over into Soto as well. “There isn’t equality in terms of leading large training monasteries and institutions. Women tend to have smaller places,” she says ([Interview with Schireson], 2010, p. 43).

This disparity leaves women to question why this is happening. One reason that is proposed is that women do not support other women. According to Gross (2010), “women by and large tend to think men are better teachers” ([Interview with Gross], p.

43). Schireson (2010) has talked with female Dharma teachers about this issue and says that women find this “very painful--more painful than men not supporting them” ([Interview with Schireson], p. 43). Gross (2010) points out that this belief is the result of a “lingering inferiority” attitude that women have a hard time overcoming ([Interview with Gross], p. 43). Schireson expands upon this in terms of Soto Zen. She explains that in the Zen tradition, the quintessential “Zen master is associated with the strong, silent type” and there are no images of what a female Zen master should look like (p. 43). Female Zen practitioners therefore have no role models of “how to inhabit the role of leader,” so students question women’s authority ([Interview with Schireson], 2010, p. 43).

Reverend Teijo Munnich recognizes that something in the American culture is suppressing women, and adds that it is “not men” (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). Munnich feels that women are doing it to themselves (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). For her, the big question is, “What are we doing? Why do we hold back?” (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). From a Soto Buddhist standpoint, Munnich says women need to recognize that the suffering comes not from outside, but from one’s own mind, and recognizing that “is huge” (T. Munnich, personal communication, December, 15, 2010).

Perhaps this goes back to the self-concept of women that is often molded by society. Within Buddhism, women and women’s work has often been devalued. For example, Tisdale (2006) points out that “there is nothing sacred about sweeping the walk of a monastery, and nothing profane about sweeping the kitchen at home” (p. 10). Yet, in a great deal of Buddhist literature, sweeping the monastery sidewalk is evidence of an

elevated pursuit, but a woman caring for her home as her “toddler eats breakfast” is not (p. 10). She posits the questions: “Which act is more difficult to do well, with mindfulness and selfless attention? What exactly makes them so different?” (p. 10). Buddhism’s historical sociological value concepts have shaped this scenario so that women’s work is not valued. Such blatant sexism cannot help but become internalized by generations of women, and this internalization may still be evident in modern Soto Zen when women think that men are better teachers.

The problem of internalized inferiority means gender issues and women’s practice needs are of concern for American Soto women. Soto teacher Catherine Hondorp questions how women should engage in Soto Zen practice, yet confront this issue of sexism “that shows up in our society and in our monasteries and practice centers” (C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011). She feels that the full inclusion of women in Soto, especially in the U.S. where women and men practice together, is raising the issue of female monastics’ practice needs, and in turn is helping to uncover sexism within American Soto practice. After all, if “cleaning toilets is considered excellent Buddhist practice, why not diapers?” (Tisdale, 2006, p. 10). Zen centers are beginning to answer the needs of women, by implementing limited day care programs, for example, which may help to change some women’s internalized feelings that their lives and Zen practice are somehow less important than men’s.

Paula Arai points out that American women are not the first Buddhists to tackle the issue of gender inequality directly and do something about it. Clearly the nuns in Nagoya are an excellent example of other Buddhist women seeking change, but Arai adds that women all over Asia have historically fought against unfair, gendered practices. “For

2,500 years, what did they think all the Buddhist women were doing if they weren't about liberation?" (P. Arai, personal communication, June 22, 2011). While Asian women were seeking religious liberation in the form of *nirvana*, Arai notes, some were also quietly fighting for sociological liberation (P. Arai, personal communication, June 22, 2011).

Recently, both in Japan and the U.S., women in Soto Zen have seen dramatic shifts toward greater equality in the practice, which may be considered "cause for celebration" ([Interview with Schireson], 2010, p. 39). Furthermore, because gender equality has officially been achieved and overt sexism has diminished, some women say gender is no longer an issue and does not need to be discussed. However, according to many Buddhist feminists, the work is not done ([Interview with Schireson], 2010). Schireson compares the issue to when "President Obama came to office and people said 'Oh great, there's no more racism'" (p. 39). Moving in a positive direction is not the same thing as eradicating a major sociological and religious issue ([Interview with Schireson], 2010). Rita Gross is especially concerned about the younger generation of Buddhists who feel that discussing gender in Buddhism is "just genderizing the dharma" ([Interview with Gross], 2010, p. 39). She reminds people that she and other feminists are looking to "ungenderize it" from when "women were first put in a separate class" thousands of years ago (p. 40).

Feminists and many female Buddhists in general have had to reconcile the negative images of women within the tradition at large, and within Soto. The literature examined for this study brought to light that though basic tenets which have no relation to gender, are agreed upon, gender in Buddhism, and more specifically, the female gender, remains

an issue of debate. Women have worked to resolve the issue of their gender from within the tradition with succinct counter points to the arguments that they, for different reasons, cannot achieve enlightenment. In interviews, the primary subjects of this study support the secondary research findings that many Buddhist women recognize their gender as their filter and work to move beyond their gender through this lens, not by simply ignoring it.

Within Soto Zen, American women have benefited from the Japanese nun's work and from the American Women's Movement. The result is that women in American Soto Zen do not have to deal with many of the gender issues that women of other Buddhist sects have had to. Women in American Soto Zen are therefore freed to explore other aspects of their tradition such as making it more relevant to them and other American practitioners. Still, many of the women in both the primary and secondary research agree that underlying gender issues abound and that work still needs to be done in terms of gender equality. Even though men and women are equal on the Soto books, gender issues still exist under the surface, therefore it is worthwhile to examine how women are dealing with these gender issues within their tradition. A critical element to examine, in order to better understand what women are doing from within their tradition with regards to gender issues, are their rituals.

## **CHAPTER IV: ZEN RITUAL**

### **Ritual Theory**

Rituals are seen in all societies, dating back to the earliest known communities, as a "cultural universal;" they occur in both the religious and secular realms of society (Lincoln, 1981, p. 2). For example, some rituals of a religious nature, such as praying,

chanting, or meditating, help people commune with their God or ultimate reality, (Kurtz, 2007, p. 27). Others mark life-events and transitions such as rites of passage, marriage, funerals, and birth ceremonies (p. 27). Rituals also regulate daily life with rules and procedures for food preparation and diet, sex, and hygiene (p. 27). Still other rituals help people interact with and understand nature, and mark natural cycles such as holidays and seasonal events (p. 27).

While there are many theories about ritual, it is generally agreed that ritual is a special or elevated activity, separate from the ordinary or mundane. According to ritual scholar Catherine Bell (1992), "Ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other...activities" (p. 74). In addition to differing from every day events, rituals also tend to be consciously repeated events that follow some kind of structure or procedure embedded with symbolism or meaning beyond the immediate representation (Lincoln, 1981, p. 2). This intrinsic meaning is what the ritual participant—and his or her surrounding community—take away from the process.

Ritual components may but need not be meaningful in and of themselves, because the elements within a ritual are not what give that ritual its importance (Van Bremen, 1995, p. 3). DaMatta argues that both the everyday and the ritual world are "built up from more or less arbitrary things and conventions" (as cited in VanBremen, 1995, p. 3). It is the context of the ritual that is the key factor elevating the mundane to the sacred or the ritualized (Van Bremen, 1995, p. 3). Bell (1992) agrees that the context dictates what actually emerges in the ritual activity, because "human activity is situational;" therefore, the activity, outside of the context, may not bear out the same interpretation (p. 81).

Bell (1992) goes on to elaborate on the circularity of ritual context, arguing that the creation of rituals affect the environment in such a way as to make it appear that it is the environment that is the real source of the ritual, when it is not—the person(s) performing the ritual within a certain context is the source of the ritual (p. 140). In other words, the context affects what the ritual process is by way of the ritualist(s), even though by design, it appears as if the context or environment gave rise to the ritual.

Since rituals have been around from the earliest human communities and in virtually every culture, they obviously address a fundamental human need for some distillation of an idea. On a basic level, rituals help solve problems. According to Kurtz (2007), rituals solve problems on two levels. On an abstract or religious level, rituals "bind a social order together" by bringing together people's world views and ethos (p. 28). On a practical level, rituals are socially approved responses for times when stasis or ethos is challenged, especially "at times of crisis" such as dealing with death or major life changes (Kurtz, 2007, p. 28). Bell (1992) agrees that a ritual's point is "the rectification of a problem...[that provides] a practical way of dealing with some specific circumstances" (p. 109).

In a ritual, a given problem is dealt with by shaping the response to the problem, not by changing the actual source of the problem itself (Sharf, 2005, p. 249). As a result, "ritual action is not intended to alter the natural world as such," but rather to alter people's interactions with and reactions to the world (p. 249). For example, according to Sharf, the Native American rain dance ritual is more of an outlet to express frustration than a supernatural attempt to physically change atmospheric conditions by actually bringing rain (p. 249).



Specifically, creating ritual is a strategic act that responds to a specific scenario (Bell, 1992). People structure a moment in time by their specific actions, thus creating an environment where, "by its molding of the actors, people's intentions and emotions are validated and extended" (p. 109). As Wright (2008) frames it, ritual activity creates an environment of specific moods resulting in specific reactions of thoughts, actions, and emotions coming forward (p. 11). As an effect of attempting to respond to a given situation, ritual action sees itself not as a strategic event, but as a natural reaction and therefore "does not see how it creates place, force, event, and tradition..." (Bell, 1992, p. 109). The ritual participants see themselves as responding to and not creating the scenario in which the ritual takes place—what Bell calls a “misrecognition” (p. 81).

Moreover, rituals do not exist in a vacuum, but within a society, and as a result, they organize power within social groups (p. 197). For Bell (1992), rituals are “able to reproduce or reconfigure a vision of the order of power in the world” (p. 81). Because ritual is strategically created by a people, based on a specific circumstance, and with an intended result, power relations often develop (p. 81). Power is created by the performance of ritual that the practitioner then embodies (Bell, 1992, p. 206). According to Bell (1992), whether consciously or unconsciously created, power dynamics of "domination, consent, and resistance" may naturally emerge that challenge the status quo, though there are "limits to what it can do and how far it can extend" (Bell, 1992, p. 206).

Despite these effects of ritual practice, analyzing and studying ritual may leave the impression that in reality, ritual itself is devoid of meaning. According to Wright (2008), this is because "rites performed by others will always seem hollow of meaning just by virtue of one's distance from them" (p. 10). Thus, a full apprehension of ritual depends

on participating in the experience. While understanding the situation, strategy and misrecognition inherent in rituals, it is also important to look at the motivation—the "will to act"—in order to understand how the ritual effects the person (Bell, 1992, p. 83). In attempting to understand motivation in terms of a "performative approach," the question, "How do participants come to do what they do?" is evoked (Sharf, 2005, p. 251). In other words, the performative model is more concerned with what has prompted people's will to act, what problem they are dealing with, and therefore is less concerned with analyzing what it means that they do this.

However, according to theologian Margaret Farley, people express themselves and give voice to emotions and desires through ritual, but the ritual also gives back to them, provoking, in a sense, a response from the practitioners, and bringing something out that was not there before (cited in Northup, 1997, p. 24). That is a ritual's power—not merely in the ability to communicate desires or fears, but the momentary experiential understanding of ultimate meaning, the "aha moment" that results from the ritual action. Consequently, ritual is "an approach to the meaning of experience" and a "way of pursuing truth" (Shorter, 1996, p. 25). This kind of experiential understanding is how "rituals shape, stretch, define, and redefine the identity of their participants" (Arai, 2008, p. 194).

Part of a person's identity is their concept of self in relation to a God or some kind of ultimate reality. People have a natural yearning to understand who they are and by that, "strive to make contact with something that is felt to be superior but fundamental to [their] understanding of [them]selves" (Shorter, 1996, p. 22). Put simply, people want to know that life has meaning (Shorter, 1996). Ritual takes different forms based on

different concepts of reality, but in the end is a search for “individual truth” (p. 25). By “fram[ing] experience” in a specific way that gives people a meaningful apprehension of life, ritual helps people understand and communicate with a God or reality by filling the “thin space between oneself and what is felt to be ones’ god” or reality (Arai, 2008, p. 194 & Shorter, 1996, p. 24). Here, a “translation occurs” wherein the human tendency to make connections arises, helping to gather “scattered and sporadic elements to transform an undefined sentiment into individual consciousness” (Shorter, 1996, p. 23).

The theories of how transformation in a practitioner occurs vary among scholars. For Arai (2008), ritual is about the person performing it and the transformative effect it has on the practitioner. She explains that because ritual actions have an effect on the body, transformation occurs whether or not the participant is fully aware of why or how the ritual does what it does (p. 194). Furthermore, the ritual will often “accomplish some things that are not intentionally sought, but are deeply wanted” (194). Arai is less interested in how the transformation happens than in its eventual outcome.

On the other hand, Gross (2009) finds transformation to be a side effect of ritual, not the reason for it (p. 332). Transformations “are the effect of ritual being performed precisely and regularly,” and not the purpose or reason for the ritual itself (p. 332). For Gross, ritual transformation is a product of precise repetition occurring within the ritual process, not of the ritual in and of itself (p. 332).

### **Women and Ritual**

In appreciating rituals and their place in human life, it is essential to acknowledge the role that gender plays. The religious experience as a whole must be looked at in terms of “men and women, and in no known society is this experience the same”

(Bynum, 1992, p. 267). Bynum (1992) insists that “all human beings are gendered” and the “cultural experience of being male or female” must be taken into account when studying religion and rituals (pp. 267, 266).

While this more recent development of studying the “complex relationship between religion and gender” is the result of feminist voices in the scholarship, Bynum and other scholars insist that the “varied experiences of men and women have been there all along” (Bynum, 1992, pp. 266, 272). For example, researchers have found that women have a different mode of religious and “symbolic discourse” than men (p. 272). Even when the same symbols are used, women’s interpretation and investment of meanings often varies from that of men (p. 272).

While women and ritual is a seemingly rich subject of research, there is not a great deal of literature on women’s ritualizing to study, in part because women’s rituals are adaptable, often limited by and expressing the needs of the moment (Northup, 1997, p. 6). As a result, while clear patterns have emerged, the rituals themselves are not always reproducible, and therefore not always recorded (p. 6). What is clear, however, is that women tend to create practices “that are distinctive and tailored to their needs,” and the personal experience of women is an important source of “raw material” that has been neglected in institutional religions (Arai, 2008, p. 192; Northup, 1997).

What emerges when examining women’s gendered experiences of ritual creation are several notable themes. According to Northup (1997), the first theme of women’s ritualizing is a focus on community. While this may occur in addition to individualism or be emphasized over it, community plays an important role in women’s ritualizing and religious practice. Ritual practiced within these community-oriented groups “validates

bonds between women” and, returning to Bell’s idea of ritual “construct[ing] power relationships,” empowers women in a way that a traditional ritual in a male-centered domain may not (Hoch-Smith & Spring, 1978, p. 15; Northup, 1997, p. 37). As a result, community rather than hierarchy is often the organizational principle in women’s religious activities (Northup, 1997, p. 23). This “horizontal” approach, where women work more as an ensemble than in a strict hierarchy is often seen in female-led Soto Zen Centers (Levering & Schireson, 2006). For a focus on community to remain viable, Northup (1997) suggests that the emphasis on “community must be balanced against a recognition of diversity, difference, and individual experience” of the women in the participating group (p. 34).

Another theme of women’s ritualizing focuses on the unique experience of being women. Most obvious is a focus on the female body that is so often relegated to the status of impurity in many mainstream religions. When the female body is referenced in women’s rituals, it is “a primary source for...metaphors” through which woman’s “sensory experience” is honored and deemed sacred (Northup, 1997, p. 31). In addition, the female processes of reproduction and aging are an important aspect of ritual celebration for women that continues to be explored (p. 31). Northup notes that despite some women’s groups taking issue with a ritual over-emphasis on women as mothers, the association of women with “imagery rooted in fertility, pregnancy, nursing, and parenting remains central to women’s ritualizing” (p. 32).

Women’s experience also often revolves around domestic duties, as traditionally, women have kept the house and raised the children while men have gone out to work. Although women cannot be defined simply by their relationships as maid and nanny to a

husband and children, they are still associated with the domestic sphere. Often deemed “unglorified daily activities,” “cooking, cleaning, [and] parenting” are just a few of the experiences that women incorporate into their ritual lives (Northup, 1997, p. 33). In many ways, “women have realized the inherent ritualizing of everyday tasks,” in the same sense that Zen practitioners have (p. 33).

Finally, in the religious sphere, women’s ritualizing tends to remove androcentric bias and insert women back into the liturgies. According to Bynum (1992), “Recent feminist critiques of both Western and non-Western religious traditions have agreed that men gain authority from the fact that the source of ultimate value is often described in anthropomorphic images as Father or King” (p. 266). While some feminists argue that reforming language and inserting female symbols into religion may overwrite too much of the original tradition, others see it as an important component of women’s ritualizing (p. 266). Northup (1997) writes that women’s communal memory, “the telling, repeating, and recording of [women’s] stories,” is an important aspect of inserting women into religious worship (p. 35). The telling of stories allows women to “remember their own heroes and leaders,” and bring to the present the “experience, wisdom, and power” of women before them (p. 35). Such a process, it is understood, “must be ritualized” and is often done through the ritual naming of “female family lines,” “liberating leaders,” “loved ones,” and things that women want to be healed from (p. 39).

### **Creating New Rituals**

While rituals preserve order and power relations, they also conversely serve as important aspects of “cultural innovation and change” (Kurtz, 2007, p. 27). As people evolve through history, “the context from which [they] attempt to communicate at the

borders of ritual interface also change” (Shorter, 1996, p. 27). Often, traditional rituals evolve and develop new meanings that “meet the needs of new participants” (Bynum, 1992, p. 271). When this natural evolution does not happen, cultural lag sets in. According to Kurtz (2007), the phenomenon of cultural lag occurs when reliable, time-tested rituals are performed in a culture of changing conditions and the rituals are not altered to meet the changing needs of the society, but instead, are performed as is, becoming counter-productive (p. 29). Hobsbawm (1984) believes this phenomenon can be found “in the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world, and the attempt to structure at least some parts of life within it as unchanging,” generating what he refers to as “invented tradition” (p. 2).

Invented traditions may arise formally or informally, but include patterns of behavior and set practices of “a ritual or symbolic nature” that seek to instill a continuity with the past, though the older tradition is often deliberately not used or adapted (Hobsbawm, 1984, p. 8). The construction of invented traditions may apply ancient materials toward a new purpose, or it may “graft” new elements onto already existing traditions (p. 6). While the invention of tradition has probably always happened within human society, it tends to occur more frequently in societies undergoing “rapid transformation” (p. 6).

Likewise, Zen ritual has always evolved to meet needs within the “historical situation” of the time, even if contemporary practitioners did not detect such changes, “because the ritual order always appeared to maintain the solidarity of timeless tradition” (Wright, 2008, p. 15). For Zen practitioners, ancient origins are an important aspect of rituals, with the claim often being made that rituals have not changed much since the

early days of Zen (p. 15). However, according to Wright, the historical truth is that Zen rituals have changed and evolved to meet the changing needs of host cultures, thus upholding “the basic Buddhist principle, which is that everything is subject to change” (p. 15).

### **Rituals in Zen**

Gross (2009) believes that “any coffee table picture book will quickly dispel the misimpression of many Westerners that Buddhists meditate but do not practice rituals” (p. 198). Despite popular understanding, “Zen life is overwhelmingly a life of ritual...” (Wright, 2008, p. 4). In a Zen monastery, for instance, the entire day could be considered valid research since the nature of Zen lends itself to the consideration of each activity being a ritual (Wright, 2008). As Soto Priest Catherine Hondorp (2011) explains:

What happens in terms of sitting *zazen* is you begin to see that your whole life is ritual. Yes, there are these moments when you do the chanting and you do the bowing and you offer incense; you do rituals that have been passed down. But, what really happens, what’s transformative is you begin to see that rituals such as waking up in the morning, having your coffee, or noticing the trees as they start to bud up, all of that becomes your life ritual. (personal communication, March 31, 2011)

However, Zen in America has tended to “deflect attention away from the roles of ritual practices in Zen Buddhist lives” (Arai, 2008, p. 192). Arai attributes this to the “Protestant undercurrent” in America that “placed a premium on *zazen* and philosophical understanding” of Zen and left out many of the Japanese religious ceremonies (p. 192). According to Foulk (2008), part of this anti-ritual attitude stems from the “Western



influence on Japanese intellectuals in the Meiji period and later” (p. 23). This influence extended to many of the Zen masters who came to the States to introduce Zen. Most prominent was apologist D.T. Suzuki, whose teachings on Zen became classics in American Zen culture (p. 23). He and other teachers purposefully stressed the philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic aspects of Zen and disregarded elements that made Zen appear more religious in nature (p. 23).

Furthermore, according to Foulk (2008), this is a stance that many modern Japanese scholars have proposed, naming it “Pure Zen” and seeing it as “relatively free of Buddhist rituals for dealing with spirits” and other more religious aspects (p. 39). This understanding may stem from a reading of classical Ch’an (Chinese Zen) and Zen literature “that includes some powerful stories and sayings that debunk ritualized forms of reverence” (Wright, 2008, p. 4). The great Zen masters often made the point that the practice of ritual, outside of *zazen*, is useful if it helps to awaken mindful presence, however, they also suggested that such rituals may be “subject to certain risks, such as the danger that preoccupation with ‘outer forms’ fails to evoke realization” (p. 5). In such a case, the Zen masters thought, one should forego external rituals and focus on the transformative practice of *zazen* (p. 5). Nevertheless, despite the historical warnings about ritual and the position of modern Japanese scholars, the heads of the Japanese Zen schools have rejected the idea of removing ritual practices, as ritual permeates Japanese Zen life.

When the subject of ritual is discussed in a Zen context, it must be made clear that the East Asian tradition does not have an “abstract category” to define Zen practices “with the overarching sense that accompanies the current usage of the English word

‘ritual’” ( Arai, 2008, 187, p. 188). Scholars have often referred to the nearest Japanese equivalents as being *gyoji*, which can be translated as “observances,” *hyoyo*, or “Buddhist service,” *gishiki* as “ceremony,” and *girei* or “etiquette” (Foult, 2008, p. 23; Arai, 2008, p. 187). There is “no easy translation into Japanese” of the English word “ritual” (Arai, 2008, p. 187).

According to Grimes (1985), “Zen people seldom speak” of ritual or ceremony (p. 106). They are more likely to refer to the activities they perform in a Zen context, including *zazen*, as “practice” (p. 106). A similar idea can be found in the teachings of Soto Zen master Dogen who said, “*shusho itto*,” or “practice and enlightenment are one” (Arai, 2008, p. 189). However, the meaning of practice in a Zen context does not “connote something preliminary to something else” as in practicing to play an instrument (Grimes, 1985, p. 106). In Zen, the playing is the practice (p. 107).

Similar to its effect in other religions, ritual in Zen communicates meanings and beliefs, allowing emotions, desires, and actions to come forth and affect a change in practitioners (Wright, 2008, p. 11). According to Wright, Zen ritual, through its repetition and eventual relegation to reflex, “shapes [people] into certain kinds of subjects, who not only think certain thoughts but also perceive the world and understand themselves through the patterns impressed upon them by the repeated action of ritual upon their body and mind” (p. 11).

Since Zen ritual practice functions internally for practitioners, outside witnesses may not always fully understand the virtue of participating in them. When Zen rituals are examined emically as practices that transform subjectivity and understandings of self to incorporate “concentration, intense focus, and clarity of vision,” they move the

practitioner toward the goal of enlightenment (Klein, 1999, p. 212). These characteristics and those that the ritual may foster, including humility, courage, or wisdom may all be seen as “multiple features” of enlightenment (Wright, 2008, 11, p. 12).

In North American Zen centers and monasteries, the path toward the end result of enlightenment through ritual practice is often described as being found in the practice of mindfulness (Grimes, 1985, p. 105). When Zen rituals are “performed in the spirit of meditation or mindfulness,” and with the qualification that “mindfulness is always in the present moment,” practitioners become aware that “everything from rational analysis to daydreaming and mental wandering” is slowed down or stopped altogether with the goal of transcending the mind to arrive at “an exalted state of no mind” (Wright, 2008, pp.14; S. De La Rosa, personal communication, January 26, 2011; Wright, 2008, p. 15).

Some Zen practitioners go further to claim that ritual practices like *zazen*, which can be seen as “just sitting,” are non-purposive, “that is, they are not done for any reason beyond the act of doing them” (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010; Wright, 2008, p. 14). Thus, many every day ritual “gestures do not mean, refer to, or point to anything” (Grimes, 1985, p. 106). The act being performed is simply the act being performed, and being mindful of this, being fully present with the activity, is what makes the activity sacred—a ritual. However, once the practitioner sees the activity as sacred, the practitioner is no longer mindfully in the moment *qua* moment, and must return to the mindfulness state where the activity is simply the activity. This is the unique shape that Zen ritual takes.

Emerging from this understanding, Wright (2008), suggests that the goal of no mind is the underlying purpose for rituals that are “mindful [and] meaningful,” but are, at

the same time, mental states that “practitioners seek to transcend” (p. 15). This transcendence occurs when the divide between the person and the ritual action is gone; “when there is no separation between you and whatever you are doing” (S. De La Rosa, personal communication, January 26, 2011). This understanding goes back to the notion of the practice being the play. Eliminating the duality of practice and practitioner puts the agent in the moment.

Regardless of intent—whether to transcend or inhabit the ritual—Catherine Bell cautions against adhering to a strict classification, and to instead “identify ritual-like activities—characterized by formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule governance, sacred symbolism, and performance” (as cited in Wright, 2008, p. 8). Arguably, the most prominent practice in Soto Zen is *zazen*, seated meditation. For Leighton (2008), “*zazen* practitioners understand this ritual as one that ‘enacts’ the enlightenment of the Buddha already resident within the practitioner” (p. 13). The repetitive mode of thinking that one is already enlightened in turn “helps shape who you become” (p. 13). However, some scholars question whether or not meditation is itself a ritual (Gross, 2009). For instance, Gross argues that meditation is only akin to ritual and not really a ritual because the “emphasis is on the mental state of the meditator” and not on the “correct performance of the movements” (p. 199). Some Soto practitioners admit that speaking of *zazen* as ritual may be uncommon, but still consider it protocol (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011).

Whether or not *zazen* is a formal ritual, Zen practice is steeped in rituals with formalized aspects. For example, *Darsan*, the practice of venerating images of the Buddha or Bodhisattvas, when the “Buddha being evoked is none other than the truth that

eternally dwells within the practitioner” who aspires to the qualities of that Buddha or Bodhisattva, has been central to “Buddhist practice throughout history” (Sharf, 2005, pp. 257, 258). In Mahayana belief, and by extension, in Zen, most rites and rituals are performed in the presence of such icons (Sharf, 2005). These rites include daily services of sutra chanting and meditation; *Jukai* ceremonies marking the formal initiation of a person into the Buddhist religion, and *Tokudo* ceremonies that mark the initiation of a person as a Zen priest; ceremonies for atonement called *Fusatsu*; and ceremonies that commemorate significant events in the life of the Buddha, including *Hanamatsuri*, Buddha’s birthday, and *Parinirvana* day, the day the Buddha died and entered *nirvana* (“Ceremonies”, n.d.).

Nevertheless, in addition to formalized ceremonies, Zen ritual life also incorporates less formal aspects of daily life. While meditation is a prominent feature of Zen, work is also an intrinsic component of Zen practice. Zen monasteries and Zen centers, for example, have always incorporated the work of various ordinary tasks, “all of which may be seen as forms of meditation in their own right” so long as they are pursued “purely and totally” with mindfulness (Reader, 1995, p. 230). Enlightenment, then is not something that can only be attained only while sitting in *zazen*, but becomes something “which is embedded in everyday life” (p. 230).

For Zen practitioners, everyday events such as “cooking and doing the dishes, sweeping and sewing, washing one’s face and teeth, [and] weeding the garden” all become a moving meditation when performed with mindfulness (Tisdale, 2006, p. 9). Here, ritual turns the seemingly profane into the sacred, where eating “becomes not just a way of gaining nourishment for the body, but an act of worship” (Kurtz, 2007, p. 34).

Tisdale (2006) explains that these experiences become a “metaphor for internal experiences,” (p. 9). For instance, sweeping the sidewalk becomes clearing the mind of excess clutter, allowing a clear path to unfold. Returning to the idea of transcendence, from a Zen perspective a practitioner’s goal in these moving meditations is to become one with the activity, so that there is no person sweeping the sidewalk, only sweeping and the sidewalk.

Its important to discuss ritual in relation to Zen because most practices in Zen may be considered ritual. In actuality, the term practice is another way of saying Zen ritual. Secondary research reveals that ritual permeates Zen life and that ritual is an important and communicative aspect of many women’s lives. Within the realm of ritual, women’s ritualizing experiences are often unique. The themes of community, the experience of being a woman, domestic duties, and gender inclusive language seem to permeate women’s ritual lives. Furthermore, creating new rituals to keep up with a changing society is an activity that women seem to intuitively understand needs to be engaged in, as they often create ritual to suit their needs.

In examining Soto women’s ritual lives, a clearer picture should emerge of what they think of themselves, their roles, and their tradition, as well as their concerns about the tradition.

## **CHAPTER V: USE OF RITUALS BY JAPANESE SOTO ZEN NUNS**

### **Legitimacy as a Motive**

Ayoama Roshi, the abbess at the Nisodo in Japan and the highest ranking nun in her country, is part of an elite group of Soto monastics, a board of directors of sorts, from which the heads of Eihiji and Sojiji, the two head Soto temples, are chosen (P. Arai,

personal communication, June 22, 2011). Though Roshi and other Soto women now hold ranks at most levels of that hierarchy, the very top position—head of one of the temples—will probably never fall to Ayoama Roshi simply because she is a woman, despite her being among the most practiced and respected monastics in and outside of Japan (P. Arai, personal communication, June 22, 2011). With this kind of lingering gender discrimination, it is imperative that Japanese Soto nuns demonstrate their legitimacy as monastics, if they are to not only maintain their rights within the sect, but also be respected by Japanese society as legitimate female monastics.

Because the nuns are women, they fight against Buddhist notions that, among other things, see them as impure and as a result, not as competent as male monks. At the same time, Japanese society holds femininity in high esteem and values certain traits and feminine roles that women play. To navigate these opposing socio-religious undercurrents and to defend their status as equal monastics and relevant to the laity, the nuns engage in purposeful ritual activities. Some rituals are daily activities while others take place monthly, yearly, or even once in a lifetime (Arai, 1999, p.109). According to Arai, rituals assist the nuns "through various phases of growth and development" where they, in turn, help others "by performing rituals that quietly heal, that honor loved ones, and that celebrate life" (p.109). Most importantly, the nuns' rituals help "define what it means to be a nun, for both the woman herself and for the people around her" (p.109). The nuns defend their status as equal and relevant through ritual activities that include showing reverence for their roots and being ultra traditional, while utilizing their society's concept of the feminine to work in their favor in re-categorizing the monastic.

## **A Return to Roots**

As a ritual of empowerment, the Japanese nuns revived an old ceremony and returned to their roots in a ritual thanking Ananda for "what they maintain was his act of wisdom in entreating Sakyamuni to allow women to enter the path of the renunciates" (p.197). During this rarely performed long and involved service, the nuns take a moment to celebrate Prajnaparamita as the mother of all Buddhas and at the end, they state unequivocally that all women can attain enlightenment. According to Arai (2008), this ceremony was first revived just prior to the nuns "launching into a public and institutionalized effort to bring egalitarian practices to bear on twentieth-century Soto regulations" (p.197). The ritual was an early step that the nuns took toward expressing their "emotional and political concerns" about gender discrimination in their sect (p.195). Within this ritual of empowerment, the nuns affirm their legitimacy, thereby combating the once overt and now more underlying currents of gender discrimination and their own sense of inferior status. Empowerment is, after all, a form of self-perceived and declared legitimacy.

## **Appearing Ultra-Traditional**

The root of the nuns' tactics for advancing their monastic legitimacy lies in their desire to be recognized as ultra-conservative monastics, proudly promoting themselves as the keepers of traditional Soto Zen monasticism. They do this by maintaining strict monastic codes that include lifestyle choices such as celibacy and the more appearance-oriented practice of shaving their heads, both of which many modern monks no longer follow because of Meiji-era proclamations that, in effect, made male monastics into householder priests.



During the Meiji Restoration, monastic life “came to be regarded as a profession rather than a way of living” when the relationship between the state and Buddhist clergy underwent dramatic and lasting changes (Haruko, 1998, p. 30). In 1872, the Meiji government instituted the *nikujiki saitai* law, which allowed monks to “eat meat, have hair, [and] wear lay clothing” (Arai, 1999, p. 47; Jaffe, 2001, p.4). In addition, monks were required to adopt surnames and to "register in the universal household registration system" (Jaffe, 2001, p. 4). Almost a year later, nuns were given this permission, though they were not permitted to wear lay clothing (Arai, 1999, p. 47).

The most significant change was the 1872 edict allowing monks to marry, though records show that this had been quietly tolerated since at least the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Haruko, 1998, p. 29). However, this was the first time in the history of Buddhism that "the majority of ordained clerics openly married" (p. 29). As a result, these new rules for practice instituted the custom that is still practiced in Japan: priests pass on their temples to their sons, instead of to a Dharma heir, or principle disciple, as the Buddhist tradition stipulates (p. 29).

Though the majority of monastics adopted these new practices, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the issue of clerical marriage "remained a subject of contention" (Jaffe, 2001, p. xiv). According to Arai, the monks were pressured to marry, "in part because the government wanted to dilute the power of the Buddhist temple"(P. Arai, personal communication, June 22, 2011). Most monks, recognizing this, did not necessarily want monastic codes to be less strict

In modern Japan, "marriage and the family have permeated life at all but the small minority of temples that are reserved for monastic training" (Jaffe, 2001, p. 1). In this,

the Japanese are "unique among Buddhist clerics" to be accepted as members of the "sangha by both the Buddhist establishment and parishioners alike" (p. 2). There are some married priests in other Asian countries, like Korea and Taiwan, but this is mostly because of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Japanese influence (p. 2). Furthermore, Japanese society does not seem to mind its priests being married. In a 1993 survey sent out from the Soto sect, 95% of people surveyed said they did not care if their priest was married or not (p. 2). However, marriage of monastics is still considered a non-traditional practice.

Though the Meiji era establishment of clerical marriage changed what it meant to be a monastic in Japan, it also created an environment where non-ordained women became an integral part of temple life. A compilation of standards for temple wives on how to participate in running the temple was drafted as recently as the 1989 *Jitei fujin hyakka*, a manual written by a Buddhist priest, that provides "basic information concerning the role of the temple in the local community, the training of one's son to be a future abbot, management of the temple cemetery, and basic Buddhist teachings" (Jaffe, 2001, p. 2). The Soto sect also issued an earlier 1960s handbook titled *Jitei no sho*, *The Handbook for Temple Wives*, that described "how the temple family should serve as a shining example of Buddhist domestic life, with the abbot performing Buddhist rituals and sermons, the wife caring for the education of the children and helping with the parishioners, and the children helping in general with temple maintenance" (p. 2). Temple wives were seen as integral participants in the upkeep of the temple, and were respected for this role; however, they were always second to their husbands, the temple priests, and not looked upon as equals.

The nuns, on the other hand, chose not to adhere to the new monastic rules, despite an 1873 Meiji regulation that permitted them to follow the same relaxed guidelines as monks (Arai, 1999). While some argue that the nuns have chosen to remain celibate due to social pressure that forces nuns to uphold tradition, the nuns say that they freely choose their traditional mode because this lifestyle best reflects the traditional Zen practice laid out by their founder, Dogen. Though he lived long before the social pressure for monks to marry, Dogen, "anticipated the developments in this century, and warned monastics about modifying a monastic lifestyle" (P. Arai, personal communication, June 22, 2011; Arai, 1999, p. 18). Dogen believed people could not "have both the attitudes and lifestyle of a lay person *and* reap the rewards of a renunciate" (Arai, 1999, p. 18). For Dogen, enlightenment was the result of maintaining a strict monastic lifestyle, as anyone who left home would be released from Samsara, while a monastic with the "mind of a layperson has double faults" (p. 18). For the nuns, the deliberate choice to remain celibate follows Dogen's codes and establishes the perception that they are upholding tradition, and furthermore, that the monks have gone astray, which is a key component in demonstrating the nuns' monastic legitimacy.

However, there may be another underlying reason why the nuns have chosen to remain celibate, harking back to the need to counter the concept that women are impure beings. The implication that women's blood is impure is especially strong in Japan. The Japanese, in particular, have been concerned with female impurity, dating back to the Kamakura period when the *Ketsubon* or Menstruation Sutra was widely circulated in Japan and read until the late nineteenth century (Das Gupta, 2009, p. 230). The *Ketsubon Sutra* explains that women's blood "polluted the ground and the waters that were used to

make offerings to the Buddhas and severely offended them” (p. 230). This practice resulted in women accumulating negative karma that, upon death, would send them to the “Blood Pond Hell” (p. 230). Often this sutra was laid in a woman’s coffin after her death to save her from this realm of hell.

It is believed that the *Ketsubon Sutra* originated in China, where it was incorporated into Buddhism, and then traveled to Japan, where it was widely distributed among the Soto Zen sect and took a role in scripture as an aid to women in the attainment of enlightenment (Yuko, 1998, p. 73). It was later incorporated into sect ceremonies, including ordination ceremonies and festivals. Though the sect eventually ended this practice in 1988, as recently as 1967 the Showa Revised Standards for Soto Meditation handbook “direct[ed] that the *Ketsubon Sutra* should be conferred on about the fifth day of the *jukai* [ordination ceremony]...” (p. 74). During these ceremonies, Soto women were also made to wear or swallow “a special charm...so as not to spread the blood defilement around them” (p. 75).

Clearly, the Soto sect has had a long and deeply ingrained history regarding women as impure, sinful, and in need of assistance to overcome these defects. The Soto nuns are aware of their sect’s long history with the *Ketsubon Sutra* and beliefs about women as impure. By remaining celibate, the nuns downplay the biological and potentially negative characteristics attributed to women. In so doing, they effectively combat any notions that may arise questioning their purity and therefore monastic legitimacy, and in turn validate their role as keepers of traditional monasticism in the eyes of their fellow monastics.

In addition, the choice to remain celibate maintains the nuns' legitimacy with the laity as well because the choice allows the nuns to "lead a full monastic life rather than one divided between family and temple responsibilities" (Arai, 1999, 142). In Japan, according to Ayoama Roshi, being a nun is a profession (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). Within Japanese society, when a woman becomes a mother, she is generally expected to stop working because child rearing becomes her job. If a woman were to work and be a mother, she would be seen as having two jobs, something that in America is not so strange, but which in Japan is not the norm (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). In Japan, the woman would be seen as "being derelict" in her duty as a wife, and especially as a mother (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). This idea carries over into the realm of monasticism as a profession. It is generally not socially acceptable to perform dual roles.

While some may think that the nuns are being held back by not being permitted to marry or that there are "unfair social pressures" at work, Soto scholars are quick to point out that the nuns have made a deliberate choice to maintain these standards (Arai, 1999, p.139). The issue of celibacy and maintaining monastic codes comes up for a vote every year, as does the fact that Soto nuns' numbers are dwindling. According to Arai, when the nuns deliberate on whether they should "be more lax to put it in a negative term or be more open to put it in a positive light," they don't see "the point of allowing a greater range of lifestyles and practices" while still maintaining the title of nun (P.Arai, personal communication, June 22, 2011). One Soto nun pointed out that "there are more people who are beginning to think that nuns are keeping the Buddhist truth alive—more than monks" (qtd. in Arai, 1999, p. 142). Japanese Soto nuns maintain an image of strict

priorities within culturally imposed standards of propriety, and as a result, they are accepted and supported by the laity as legitimate monastics.

The Japanese Soto nuns also maintain their monastic reputations by preserving the traditional image of a renunciate, specifically, in keeping up the ritual of a shaven head. While there “is no precept requiring a nun to shave her head,” the Soto nuns have decided that as traditional renunciates, this practice is an important aspect of their lives. On a purely physical level, this identifies the nuns as monastics, which in turn brings with it the appropriate reaction from the community.

As one Soto nun interviewed by Aria remarked:

...a clean-shaven head brings many people to you who will initiate speaking about many things. A person who has hair is not treated the same, because others feel it is not appropriate to speak with unrelated persons about certain topics. Most people feel that when talking to regular people, there is nothing they can do about it or they will not understand. But, as a nun, they come to you. (Arai, 1999, pp. 141, 142)

In effect, by shaving their heads, the nuns establish their legitimacy, positioning themselves within the confines of the purely monastic community versus being identified as feminine. Japanese culture tends to value the feminine trait of long hair on women (Arai, 1999). By shaving their heads, the nuns are separating themselves from this association and establishing themselves as monastics. Furthermore, because many monks choose not to shave their heads after their training period, the nuns often quite literally, appear more monastic than the monks. One nun said that she thinks it is “bad that monks

let their hair grow,” alluding to the nuns’ communal opinion that the nuns are practicing Soto Zen correctly where as the monks are not (p. 141).

### **Utilizing the Japanese Cultural Concept of Femininity**

Paradoxically, while the Soto nuns have chosen to fight some aspects of the potentially discriminating perceptions of women with traditional monastic living, they have also chosen to embrace some of these perceptions and deliberately use them to their benefit. Most importantly, they have adopted the role of mother in many of their rituals and daily activities. This choice is the result of the separation of ritual activities and labors between monks and nuns within the temples that forced the nuns to find unique methods of income. By filling a motherly role, nuns provide a service that the monks simply cannot and this, in turn, establishes relevancy with the laity.

For many years, before sect regulations were changed, nuns were prohibited from running the larger temples and were therefore prohibited from performing typical temple rituals, such as funeral rites. These large-scale rituals are an important income source for temples, and priests were reaping the financial benefits. In fact, priests became so involved in performing rites that they came to be seen by the laity as ritualists rather than spiritual teachers (Arai, 1999, p. 146). A survey taken in the late ‘80s revealed that of 1000 people, 78% went to priests for mortuary rites versus 8% who went for spiritual reasons (p. 145). Because these services were and continue to be a major part of a temple’s income, the nuns had to find other ways of serving the lay community and assembling much-needed financial support. Even now with the rules changed in their favor, the nuns have had a difficult time taking this practice away from the purview of the priests because families often don’t want to “move their ancestors from one temple to

another,” and instead choose to remain loyal to the same temple. This predicament usually eliminates the possibility of nuns offering such rituals for the laity (p. 146).

However, the nuns found a niche that needed filling as mothering counselors and spiritual advisors—a role the monks were not invited to fill because of their gender—and also began fulfilling Japanese society’s desire to preserve traditional culture by recasting rituals as traditionally monastic.

In many societies, women are seen as having an innate maternal nature and are often deemed “a species of mothers,” for the simple reason that women are the ones who bear children (Yuko, 1998, p. 78). The opinions regarding motherhood that have entered the Buddhist canon and scriptures, like everything else, must be understood in the context of the time when they were written and with an understanding that those who wrote the scriptures were likely furthering their own social and religious agendas. Though Buddhism has its share of discriminating scriptures and “distorted perceptions of motherhood,” there are ideals within Buddhism that stress motherhood as a much-adored aspect of life and often urge “women to be self sacrificing mothers” (p. 81). This is evident within the Soto sect’s guide for proselytizing which states:

...even if equal numbers of men and women are assumed, I think it is right to say that all men, without exception, are part of woman. The reason being that all people are born of a mother. And they are brought up by their mother. From this alone, it can be said that people are part of their mothers and belong to their mothers... (qtd. in Yuko, 1998, p. 78)

Historically, and especially in the Meiji era, the guiding mantra of society and the phrase that shaped a great deal of government policy, with respect to women, was “good



wife, wise mother” (Nolte & Hastings, 1991, p. 158). State propaganda urged women to “contribute to the nation” by mothering “the old, young, and ill,” and by responsibly raising children (p. 152). This romantic concept still surrounds motherhood in modern-day Japan. There are “strong fixed perceptions of ideological maternalism,” with both men and women “brought under the compelling ‘spell’ of motherhood” (Yuko, 1998, p. 82). This spell, an idealized image of “an all embracing mother love...[that] gives birth to everything,” is said to arouse in many Japanese people an almost reverent regard for mothers (p. 78). Perhaps not coincidentally, this concept has conveniently often left many Japanese mothers alone to shoulder the burden of the unpaid work of childcare (p. 79). The Japanese feminine trait of motherhood is deeply ingrained and those mothers who don’t fit into society’s sentimental mold of maternalism are often disapproved of by the androcentric Japanese culture (p. 79).

Within Japanese society, the nuns function as monastic mothers to the laity, listening to concerns with kindness and open hearts. The nuns see their role as facilitating an atmosphere where people feel safe and comfortable to have open and personal conversations (Yuko, 1998, p. 146). A nun interviewed by Arai described it as follows: “It seems that the laity have a much easier time talking with nuns than with monks because it is seen as though people look at nuns like they look at a mother” (qtd. in Arai, 1999, p.147).

A survey taken in 1990 revealed that the nuns are doing an effective job of promoting this image, because as one lay follower put it: “Nuns are better listeners, like mothers” (qtd. in Arai, 1999, p. 146). The nuns see themselves in the role of “womanly listener,” which allows them to fulfill their society’s requirement that women be kind and

gentle mothers while garnering respect from the community for assuming this important and dignified feminine role (Arai, 1999, p. 146).

Also fulfilling this mothering role are the nuns' activities with charity work, where they care for others, just as a good mother is expected to. They often care for "children in orphanages or nurseries...are girl scout leaders, [or lead] women's associations, [and] associations for the elderly" (Arai, 1999, p. 145). In performing these services, they are adhering to the classic Japanese maternal role of mothers that care for the young and old and show a responsibility for nurturing well-rounded citizens. The Japanese Soto nuns appear to have embraced the notion that respected women within their culture fulfill the mother role, thus addressing a need within the lay community, and as a result, gaining respect and legitimacy by adhering to this social construction. However, at the same time they are also filling a gap that monks, as men, simply cannot fill.

### **Re-Categorizing Monastic Practices**

Another method of garnering legitimacy with both monastics and the laity is the nuns' incorporation of traditional Japanese activities such as *Chado*, or tea ceremony, and *Ikibana*, or flower arranging, into their monastic practices and recasting them as traditionally monastic. Both practices have strong sociological connections with traditional Japanese femininity dating back to the Tokugawa era, where the proper wife and mother was skilled at performing household jobs, which included *Ikebana* and *Chado* (Walthall, 1991, p. 46). In 1903, the Soto nuns decided to officially incorporate these practices into their monastic lives and began training nuns in these traditions. In so doing, they were participating in both "the Meiji construction of 'traditional Japanese

Buddhism and culture” and the “traditional expectations for women,” all of which spoke to a nation that was “zealously trying to preserve its own refined traditions” (p. 162). Currently, the traditional arts are seen by society as affirming the “traditional views of women as nurturing and supporting others” in addition to cultivating classic feminine traits such as “refined speech and behavior” (p. 163). However, in addition to this association, the Japanese Soto nuns employ these practices as a means of showing their monastic dedication by stressing the ties of these practices to traditional monasticism over those of traditional femininity.

Though they are currently most associated with Japanese feminine roles, the traditions of *Ikebana* and *Chado* both stem from religious practices. While in *Chado* women are now among the main practitioners, those who created and controlled it for almost 500 years of its history were men (Mori, 1996, p. 119). In its early years and up until 1894, women were not permitted to “teach, perform publicly, or receive certification” in *Chado* (p. 128). However, in the short period that women have been allowed to participate in the ceremony, it has come to be known as a quintessential female activity, becoming “part of the curriculum of many schools” and “often provided by businesses as a prerequisite for female staff” (p. 118). *Chado* is seen as a practice that nurtures women’s abilities and skills in performing wifely duties. As such, it is often used as “bride training” to teach women the needed skills within the domestic sphere as well as traditional “values to pass on to their children” (p. 125). Similarly, in the Taisho and Meiji periods, brides-to-be practiced *Ikebana* and today, the activity is mostly practiced by women (“Ikebana,” n.d.).

Despite the feminine perceptions now associated with these two traditional arts, their history shows them to be rooted in traditional expressions of Buddhism. *Chado* developed alongside Zen. As Rinzai Zen founder Eisai Zenji remarked: “Tea and Zen have the same flavor” (qtd. in Yasuhiko, 1989, p. 5). This sentiment was perhaps the result initially, at least in part, of tea drinking by monks as a practical aid for staying awake during meditation. Eventually, tea drinking evolved into an elaborate ceremony that included preparation, an offering to the Buddha, drinking, and cleaning up. There were influential figures—most notably, Sen no Rikyu—who refined the practice to reflect quintessential Zen motifs and expressions and brought it to the form of *Chado* that is revered today (Soshitsu, 1998).

Likewise, *Ikebana* has its roots in religious practices. Its origins stem from the 600-year-old ritual of offering a flower to the Buddha. In India, flowers were casually placed on statues and altars as offerings. In the 6th century, this practice was brought to Japan where the Japanese aesthetic took the practice to a new level (“Ikebana,” n.d.). The *Ikebana* tradition is traced back to a priest at the Rokkakudo Temple in Kyoto who developed methods of using containers to present, not simply place, the flowers on altars (“Ikebana,” n.d.). Initially, only priests and nobility practiced *Ikebana*, but by the late fifteenth century, it became a practice of the masses (“Ikebana,” n.d.).

The Soto nuns have chosen to emphasize these traditional religious origins when explaining the reasons for their practices. They see these activities as a “basic aspect of their Zen practice” and “part of the life of being a monastic in Japan” (Arai 1999, p.144). *Chado*, for example, is “an activity for teaching someone how to act in the refined

manner of a Buddha” and is “designed to cultivate four virtues—*wa* [harmony], *kei* [respect], *sei* [purity], [and] *jaku* [tranquility]” (p. 118).

Aside from the religious implications of these activities, the nuns also stress a practical necessity for properly conducting them. Within various parts of the temple, there are flowers as offerings, and monastics must know how to arrange them. Similarly, when there is a gathering of nuns or when guests visit, tea must be made accordingly. Nuns are unique in their cultivation of these practices because monks “do not have an institutional structure that requires practice of these traditional arts as nuns do” (Arai 1999, p. 114). In fact, because so many monks are also householders, they pass these duties to their wives, invoking the more modern interpretation of these activities as feminine. The nuns disagree with this practice, saying that “as monastics, [the monks] should do it” (p. 144). By participating in these traditional Japanese ritual arts and emphasizing their monastic relevance, the nuns are demonstrating their commitment to traditional monasticism for the laity and their fellow monastics.

Examining the struggle for equality that the Japanese Soto nuns have endured reveals that the fight has been waged by intuitive women who understand the limitations that they face both within monastic life and within their society as a whole. They appear fully aware of the potentially discriminating ideals inherent in both realms and have used these standards to their advantage, meeting them and positioning themselves beyond reproach in matters both monastic and feminine. They have thus managed to walk the line between these two worlds to establish their vision of what a proper monastic woman should be and to that end, what a proper monastic should be, while establishing their legitimacy as both proper women and traditional monastics. This legitimacy is needed if

they are ever to be fully equal with the monks, on their own terms. The tenor of their practice now shows their monk counterparts that true monastic life is evidenced in their actions, and that they are the standard by which monastic life should be judged.

Legitimacy is important to the Soto nuns in Japan, whose ritual practices demonstrate to monastics and laity their legitimacy within both realms. The literature on the Japanese nuns revealed that legitimacy is gained by being beyond reproach monastically, and by being culturally feminine when need be. The question remains, however, what does legitimacy look like for American Soto women? If it is the same, then the ritual practices may be similar, but if legitimacy is understood differently by ordained American Soto women, it will be clear that the practices of American Soto women differ.

## **CHAPTER VI: LEGITIMACY FOR AMERICAN SOTO ZEN WOMEN**

### **Levels of Legitimacy**

Soto women in the U.S. establish their legitimacy in different ways and for different reasons than those that motivate and guide the nuns in Japan. In the US, legitimacy is less about following strict religious or cultural modes and more about studying with important teachers, and subsequently teaching others. The most basic level of legitimacy for both groups is attained by studying with respected Soto teachers. To become a leader in Soto Zen Buddhism, women in the practice seek thorough training. Studying with Japanese Soto Headquarters' recognized teachers is important if a practitioner is to rise in the ranks of the tradition and be respected by other Soto practitioners. When Soto women speak of their teachers, it is always with respect and

admiration and the teachers' names are always mentioned because the status of the teacher extends legitimacy to the student.

When a teacher feels the student is ready, and if the student wants to be further empowered in the tradition by taking the precepts beyond those of a lay practitioner, the teacher will send the student on to their next level of training in the priesthood, which often includes practice periods at Tassajara Monastery in the U.S., or at monasteries or convents in Japan. Such Japanese monasteries and convents are not likely to accept students who are not affiliated with a respected Soto teacher, so the first level of legitimacy that American women must gain with their teachers is imperative if they are to move on to other levels of empowerment.

Studying with respected teachers who themselves have studied with respected teachers in a lineage of such Soto teachers is a cornerstone tradition in the sect. In both Chinese Ch'an and Japanese Zen, lineage is a foundational concept where "one can rely on there having been a transmission of awakened mind down to one's present teacher and to oneself" (Levering, 2000, p. 155). Passing on Buddha mind in a "true lineage" means that in their teachers, students may see "a mind identical to that of Sakyamuni Buddha himself" (p. 156). Within Soto, Dogen "had an immense belief" in passing transmission of Buddha mind from teacher to student and this emphasis on lineage is still a foundational aspect of Soto teaching (p. 160).

Though the emphasis on lineage is a crucial element of Soto both in Japan and in the U.S., and the bedrock for establishing legitimacy, it is widely acknowledged that the official lineage of the sect is "probably incorrect" (Levering, 2000, p. 156). Many twentieth-century scholars are quick to point out "that the claims of authors from early

Ch'an and in later periods in China to have traced their lineage back to Sakyamuni do not withstand historical scrutiny" (p. 157). The idea of one line of uninterrupted transmission in the sect is generally agreed to be fiction, despite its recurrent use during daily services and rituals (p. 157).

Even with this understanding that an actual unbroken line is improbable, lineage remains central to Soto teachings. According to Michael Wenger, who served as the San Francisco Zen Center's director of scholarly and educational projects and programs, this understanding does not negatively affect practitioners because "Zen practice is so much in and about the present moment, that Zen practitioners need to have a lineage as an anchor into the past" (as cited in Levering, 2000, p. 158). While the ancestral line may not be an exact direct lineage since the time of the Buddha, the more recent lineage of teachers, at least for the past decades, is a direct lineage. Important figures in early U.S. Soto like

Maezumi Roshi or Suzuki Roshi have lineages of students who proudly introduce themselves as being a part of their respective ancestries.

In addition to belonging to a respected lineage, female ordained Soto teachers further their recognition, and thereby legitimacy, by joining national and international Soto associations. In the U.S., the American Zen Teacher's Association and the Soto Zen Buddhist Association unite Zen and Soto Zen teachers in an affiliated group. Teachers in the groups, however, are not " beholden to these groups;" rather, the organizations serve to identify members as authorized teachers in the Soto community (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). Other organizations, such as the Shogaku Zen



Institute, bring ordained people together to “study how to be a priest in the world” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011).

Once the first level of legitimacy as an ordained Soto practitioner is established in the U.S., the next level of legitimacy is bestowed via recognition by the Japanese Soto Headquarters. There was a time when early Japanese Soto teachers in America did not mandate that their students go to Japan for practice periods. These Japanese teachers didn’t think it was necessary for Americans to have that relationship with Japan, despite the most respected among them having engaged in practice periods in Japan that added to their legitimacy.

Currently, the Soto HQ is working on implementing rules for training periods in Japan. The rules as of September 2011 require training in 90-day practice periods, but in order to get this certification, the student must have a degree equivalent to a Bachelor’s Degree. Otherwise, the person must undergo a two-year training (four practice periods) at a Japanese monastery (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). However, if a person’s teacher is not recognized by Japan, the student is not recognized either.

In Japan, ordained practitioners are recognized as first class, second class, third class, and lower classes depending on certain conditions like how many practice periods they’ve done (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). Most ordained American women who study in Japan are categorized as second-class Zen teachers in Japan (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). As second-class teachers, these American women operate within the same hierarchy as Japanese Soto priests (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011).

Speaking Japanese allows for another kind of certification that non-Japanese teachers can acquire (S. De La Rosa, personal communication, January 26, 2011). In addition, as Zen teachers not residing in Japan, all American Zen teachers have the status of Foreigner Missionary outside of Japan (S. De La Rosa, personal communication, January 26, 2011).

All of the women in this study hold the same rank and recognition in Japan as they do in the states, either because they studied in Japan or because they underwent practice periods in the states and were ordained when students did not have to travel to Japan for official recognition of practice periods. Grace Schireson traveled to Japan for practice periods and “the status and the empowerments” that came along with such distinguished training (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). For Schireson, and for many of the women interviewed in this study, getting recognized by Japan is a necessity. As she describes it: “It’s one of those bases that I touched because I was a woman” (personal communication, February 14, 2011). Because of the historical bias against women, Schireson, like many of her American peers and the Soto nuns of Japan before her, took extra measures to validate her authority in the eyes of Soto Headquarters.

#### **Explanation of the Term “Monastic” in the U.S.**

In Japan, while many male Soto monastics spend time in a monastery for training, few actually engage in a monastic life all the time, instead choosing to be “temple priests who marry, raise families, and make a living by providing their parishioners with funerals and memorial services” (Foulk, 2008, p. 38-9). Though this is common for monastic men in Japan, it is not the norm for monastic women. Even the few females who are both married and practice in the convents cannot be ordained as nuns (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). However, according to Arai, “there is a way for a

[Japanese] woman to be a lay woman and have a very serious respectable and committed and strong practice” in Japan that is not seen in the U.S. because Buddhism is still too new here (personal communication, June 22, 2011).

Many American women take the path of lay ordination. However, those few who go on to the intense training periods in Japan or in American Soto monasteries are often following a more monastic path toward priestly ordination. In discussing the ordained women of the U.S., a more precise understanding of the term monastic, as it is understood in the U.S., is paramount. What is seen in the U.S. with monastically ordained women is that while some live lives akin to the nuns in Japan, other women live more like many Japanese male priests—what Arai refers to as a “layified monastic lifestyle” (P. Arai, personal communication, June 22, 2011).

It is “clear that Buddhist monasticism in this country is different in many ways from that phenomenon as it exists in the East and is very much in an experimental stage” (Boucher, 1993, p. 89). Suzuki Roshi, referred to this new group of Buddhists in the U.S. “as neither lay nor ordained” (Tsomo, 1999, p. 17). However, Gross (1993) points out that, historically, Buddhism “has stressed the differences between the life of a monastic and the life of a householder. But perhaps they are not so different” (p. 277). The result is a “monastic situation” in America where the monasteries serve as “temporary retreats in which complex studies and practices occur; these periods of monastic living are seen as training for everyday life as well” (p. 271). In such a monastic setting, a practitioner’s “whole life is dictated” by intense training periods (S. Stucky, personal communication, May 13, 2011). A tight and formal schedule is kept with set times for daily activities such as *zazen*, eating, and cleaning. During monastic practice situations, participants are

usually, though not always, required to shave their heads, wear prescribed Soto robes, and abstain from sexual interactions.

While the women in this study are all ordained priests, their understanding of what it means to be a woman in this role varies. For some, being an ordained priest equates to the rather traditional Japanese ideal of a Soto monastic woman. For others, this position is realized more authentically by living in the world and participating in traditional monastic situations at given times. For three of the participants in this study, a life lived in accord with classic Japanese monastic ideals such as celibacy and head shaving is their expression of their priestly vows. However, the reasons behind their choices for these practices vary from woman to woman, as does the requirement for what monastic living entails. Shotai De La Rosa falls into this category. While she shaves her head because “it’s a requirement for Dogen and Buddha,” and although she refers to herself as a priest, she is reluctant to call herself a monastic (personal communication, January 26, 2011). “To me, monastic means, mono, one, alone,” she said. “Monastic would be living without family,” a practice that De La Rosa does not adhere to because she is still in touch with her family, though she does live alone in her Hialeah, Florida *zendo* and chooses not to engage in romantic relationships (S. De La Rosa, personal communication, January 26, 2011). For De La Rosa, monastic living would also require her taking the *Vinaya* precepts, which are additional rules that she would have to follow, such as having only one meal a day. She does not feel that in her current practice she would be able to commit to the extended rules that the *Vinaya* would require of her. As a result, although she lives what would appear to be a more traditional monastic lifestyle, she remains reluctant to call herself monastic.

On the other hand, Dai-en Patricia Bennage, abbess of her own temple, Mt. Equity Zendo, does consider her role as a Soto priest a monastic position. She calls herself as a “home-leaver,” referring to her choice to leave home to participate in spiritual pursuits as the Buddha did. Bennage studied in Japan for most of her training before returning to the U.S. and opening Mt. Equity. During her training, it was required that she take a vow of celibacy (P. Bennage, personal communication, March 7, 2011). After returning to the U.S. at age 50 in the early 90s, she was too occupied with running her temple to even “consider personal relationships,” possibly alluding to the notion that though her vow was taken years ago in Japan, in America she might have more freedom to choose whether or not to continue it. Similarly, head shaving was a requirement in Japan at the women’s monastery in Nagoya where she studied. Even when in the states, she chose to keep her head shaved because she was traveling back and forth to Japan so often. Now that Bennage is “on the brink of retirement” and not called to Japan, she is no longer shaving her head, but she is still keeping her hair very short (personal communication, March 7, 2011).

On the other hand, Teijo Munnich, who refers to herself as a priest because, she says, “it sounds less gender specific,” has not taken a vow of celibacy, despite her position as abbess of Great Tree Zen Temple (personal communication, December 15, 2010). However, she has consciously chosen not to involve herself in a romantic situation because she prefers to dedicate her time to her *sangha* and to her temple. For Munnich, “it’s more a question of where do I want to put my energy, and I feel like if I were married, of course I’d want to have children, but if I were married or even in a relationship, that would constantly be pulling me away” (T. Munnich, personal

communication, December 15, 2010). Like De La Rosa and Bennage, who wear traditional Soto monk's robes, Munnich also wears traditional robes and shaves her head. Munnich recalls that she first started shaving it as "a practice in letting go" and now enjoys the freedom that comes with the practice (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010) .

There was a time when Wendy Nakao, referring to herself as abbot, head priest, or head teacher, would have fit into this category of women. Though she did not take a vow of celibacy, she has been "so-called celibate, at times" and shaved her head for "many, many years," only now choosing to keep it short instead (personal communication, W. Nakao, March 28, 2011). However, Nakao, abbot of Zen Center of Los Angeles, currently fits more comfortably into the second group of women in this study—those who practice monastically at times, but who do not otherwise appear or consider themselves monastic. Japanese Zen teacher Suzuki Roshi, who was among the first to come to America, is an example of how many women in this group choose to follow the priesthood. He was a married priest who often taught in a training monastery, "so when he [was] there, he [was] defined by that role. [However], When he [was] at his home temple with his family, he [had] a different role' (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). Schireson questions, "So would you call him a monastic or not?" (personal communication, February 14, 2011). This is the kind of question that many of the women in this group ask themselves. They do not adhere to the typical female monastic practices of shaved heads and celibacy, and as a result, they are expanding the definition of female monasticism for American Soto women.

Grace Schireson, the founder of Empty Nest Zendo, refers to herself by the official title of abbess. She adds that she could lead her center as “priest or as a head teacher or a dharma heir,” but that she has undergone the “bound seed ceremony, which is a level of empowerment,” so she uses the term abbess (personal communication, February 14, 2011). This ceremony is not required to establish or run a temple; however, because she is a woman, Schireson again stresses that she “likes to make sure [she does] all the things and then some, that are official tasks or empowerments” in the Soto school (personal communication, February 14, 2011). Though she does not consider herself a monastic, she notes that her life is not “non-monastic” either (personal communication, February 14, 2011). According to Schireson, “You’re a monastic when you’re practicing in a monastic style” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). For women in this group, “monastic-like meditation centers are absolutely critical” as places where the women can go for a more intense practice (Gross, 1993, p. 243). For example, if Schireson leads a practice period at her Zendo, she may be “working as a monastic,” though, she would not say she functions as a monastic for the most part (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). For Schireson, being a monastic is about the type and intensity of practice that is performed. Therefore, leading practice periods with others under her guidance is, for her, a more monastic role, while sitting in meditation may not always be performed as a monastic ritual, but simply as Soto Zen practice.

Though Schireson has short hair and is married with children and grandchildren, she has “always considered [herself] a monk or a nun” (personal communication, February 14, 2011). However, many of her friends have advised her that this “is not the

case because [she] is not keeping a celibate order” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). She feels that the idea of celibacy for monastics sometimes “becomes a grey [area] to some people,” especially in the Soto tradition, where marriage is permitted (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011).

While this may be true, Catherine Hondorp, as a self-described non-monastic, prefers to recast the idea that being a non-traditional ordained person in the world is “not really this or that,” and instead understands her role as a monastically ordained priest to be “an incredible offering, [living] a life of vow in the world,” which she feels is the true priesthood (C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011). Hondorp shaved her head for many years while she worked at her career as a chiropractor (C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011). She now keeps her hair short and has a partner while still engaging in activities as the priest in residence at The Zen Center on Main Street, in Massachusetts.

Similarly, Meg Levie, a priest who has short hair and a family, “sometimes practice[s] monastically” (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011). She resides with her husband and child at Green Gulch Farm, an affiliate Zen center with Tassajara, and finds that since Soto “is a married tradition,” the idea of monastic life is not always clear-cut, as is seen with the mix of monastic lifestyles in Japan (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011).

For these women, “learning how to be with one’s sexuality is far more important” than remaining celibate (W. Nakao personal communication, March 28, 2011). Participating in the Buddhist path within the world is their contribution to their *sangha*, and being with all aspects of themselves, including their sexuality, is part of their Soto



practice. They choose to interpret their roles based on their own understanding of their ordination vows, which have led them down a more householder-oriented path.

Soto women in the U.S. are not the first to deal with the issue of monastic practice and families. Women in Asian cultures have often “struggled in their spiritual paths” because of their dual and often opposing commitments to their families and to leading a strict Buddhist lifestyle. Because Zen does not “take into consideration family or rites of passage for children growing up,” Soto has been described as an inherently monastic tradition, which has historically placed women in the difficult position of balancing religious life and spiritual life. (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011). Schireson (2009) believes that “acknowledging this history is an important teaching for Western practitioners [who] need to recognize that practicing in the midst of family is not a second-rate practice, but a legitimate alternative to monastic practice” (p. 160). Levie goes further to acknowledge the power of her intimate relationships with her husband and child as ones which allow her to bring her “practice everywhere,” adding that “deep, intimate feedback” from spouses is something that should be valued because “it really helps mold people” (personal communication, February 7, 2011). Acknowledging their roles as mothers and mates helps these women practice the *dharma* and teach others about how the *dharma* can be expressed.

The expressions of monasticism in the U.S. vary from each other and from those of Japan. Many different factors go into this, but certainly it can be said that monastic legitimacy for American ordained women is not always sought primarily through adherence to strict tradition. Nevertheless, legitimacy is considered important and is best

gained within the American monastic circle by practicing with outstanding teachers and participating in intense practice periods both in the U.S. and in Japan.

### **Role of Laity in the U.S.**

As with the nuns in Japan, it is not just with fellow monastics that legitimacy in America is sought. Legitimacy is also sought with the American laity. According to Tsomo (2008), “Buddhist lay people can be quite invisible in American society” (p. 17). This is, in part, because the people who comprise the lay Buddhist community in any Zen center are far fewer than those who support Christian churches, for example.

However, it is also because the role of the laity in the U.S. is different than in Japan. The place of the laity “is coming up in a way that didn’t come up in cultures where there was a clear definition as to the role of laity and monastic” (C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011). The role of the laity in Japan is a cultural tradition, in part because Buddhism has been there much longer than in the states. That is not to say that lay practice is not thriving in the U.S., because it is. In fact, the word *sangha*, which once referred only to a monastic community, “is now commonly used [in the U.S]. . . to indicate any community of Buddhist practitioners, monastic or lay” (Ikeda Nash, 2000, p. 299).

Like monastics, the laity also revere respected teachers who follow in the tradition of an established lineage, engaging in concentrated monastic practice and taking precepts. But in the U.S., legitimacy is also established by teaching to a *sangha*. After all, if teachers have no students, how will they ever become well known? There are two major ways that a female can become a respected teacher and establish legitimacy within her community. One is to take over her temple when her teacher leaves. On this Schireson

notes that, historically, “it hasn’t worked successfully, generally for the male teachers to pass their temple to a female disciple in the Zen tradition in the West,” even though women can achieve the same positions and empowerment (personal communication, February 14, 2011). Male-run centers tend to be larger and more financially successful and perhaps as a result, many women do not attain positions as heads of Zen centers or temples when their male teachers vacate their positions (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). This predicament leaves many women with no other choice than to open their own temples.

Meg Levie notes that in opening their own temples, women are having a “smaller impact in smaller groups,” but an impact nonetheless (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011). Many women have “gone out to successfully create their own temples” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). Most women know they are not going to inherit their own temples, so if they do want to teach somewhere, they have to “go off and do it” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). Many of the women in this study, including Schireson, Bennage, De La Rosa, and Munnich, have all started their own temples. Schireson opened Empty Nest Zendo, De La Rosa opened the Buddha Soto Zen Center, and Bennage opened Mt. Equity Zendo. Munnich opened Great Tree, a women’s temple, in 1983 as “a place where women can explore together,” though men are permitted for meditation and some retreats (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010).

These American Soto women have acknowledged that building up the *sangha* and the legitimacy of affiliation to a temple can bring takes time, but as Schireson sees it, “Eventually you build something,” perhaps not the “big training temples [or] the most

important temples,” but legitimate temples, nonetheless (personal communication, February 14, 2011).

### **Cultural Differences Between Japanese and American Soto Monastic Women**

The nuns of Japan and ordained women in the U.S. cannot simply be compared without recognizing the tremendous difference that culture makes in the lives of these two groups of women. Unavoidably, they are going to have different practices due to cultural circumstances, so a direct comparison of the two groups is fruitless. However, an examination of the nuns’ practices and, more specifically, the reasons for these practices helps to better reveal how American women differ from the traditional Japanese model. Generally, the American ordained women are less concerned about monastic living or appearing monastic than the nuns in Japan. However, the American women still seek to establish legitimacy with monastics and laity; they simply go about it in different ways and for different reasons.

A great deal of the Japanese nuns’ ritual activities, including celibacy and head shaving, can be traced back to establishing their legitimacy. While legitimacy is important to ordained women in the U.S., they are not as concerned with legitimacy through these kinds of ritual actions. This is in part because the lifestyle and expectation of monastics is different in the U.S. It may also be because, according to Gross (1993), “Western Buddhism is . . . the only form of Buddhism subject to significant feminist influence” (p. 271). While this may be true, Arai is resistant to the interpretation that “American women are the ones who are now liberated and can make choices to marry and be ordained” because, as she points out, the Japanese nuns have made a deliberate

choice to follow tradition and are not forced into any particular practices (P. Arai, personal communication, June 22, 2011).

In addition, the division of labor dictates many of the services that the nuns are able to provide to the laity. To establish legitimacy with the laity, Japanese nuns have had to adapt into Japanese societal customs because they were not permitted to perform the major Soto rituals for so long, thus making themselves relevant within their communities. American women, on the other hand, do not have this problem. They have always performed and been permitted to perform the same Soto rituals as men. Where they continue to seek legitimacy, in the same way that their Japanese counterparts do, is within the realm of the temple, specifically in running large, established temples. This pursuit has led many American Soto women to start their own temples as a way of engendering legitimacy—something that is not practical in Japan due to the abundance of existing temples.

The primary research reveals that the term monastic has different meanings for different ordained Soto women in the States. Therefore, there is not one definition that will neatly group these women's ritual practices. However, though many women in this study do not consider themselves monastics in the traditional Japanese sense, they have much of the same training as those who do, and often perform the same roles as those who do, most importantly running their own temple or being a teacher at a practice center.

Primary and secondary research on legitimacy for American Soto women revealed that it is not sought through monastic practices or through living up to society's idea of femininity, in the same way that it is for the Japanese nuns. Rather, legitimacy in the

U.S. is more about education levels and training. American Soto women who have made a name for themselves in the tradition, many of whom are primary research subjects in this study, have a great deal of training both in the U.S. and in Japan. Many have chosen to study above and beyond what was required of them not only to become more steeped in the tradition, but also to further gain legitimacy in the eyes of others. Examining the American women's concept of legitimacy in relation to the Japanese nuns' practices raises the question: What do American Soto women's rituals say about them? What are they performing their rituals for if not to establish legitimacy?

#### **CHAPTER VII: AMERICAN SOTO WOMEN'S USE OF RITUAL**

Although there are similarities between Japanese and American Soto Zen women's practices, the legitimacy of American women's practice is rooted in different earth than that of the Japanese nuns, particularly during their nascent struggle. As a result, American Soto Zen is permeated with rituals that address modern American needs while bringing gender awareness into the practice. Though American Soto women do practice traditional Soto rituals, they often reexamine the rituals to identify how the rituals can better speak to the modern American practitioner. In addition, Soto women are creating new rituals by altering traditional ones and adding to the liturgy, as well as evoking the feminine within existing and newer rituals, all to better suit their needs.

While American Soto women are adapting Soto in new ways to satisfy modern needs, Schireson (2009) found in her research on female Zen ancestors that women have been doing this throughout Zen's long history. Historical Zen and Soto Zen women who practiced alongside men in patriarchal societies found ways to incorporate their "abilities and issues into Zen practice, finding ways to express and practice Zen as women rather

than as token participants in an all male Zen institution” (p. 38). Throughout Zen’s history, women often quietly displayed their own styles of leadership within their own more private institutions, including convents, hermitages, or their homes. In addition, they developed social projects in the lay community and made them a priority (p. 38). Historically, Zen women incorporated their own lives into their practice, acknowledging family life by including “loyalty to family” and a “commitment to married sexual relationships” as part of their Zen “job description” (p. 38). The historical Zen woman, was, in effect, quite similar to the modern American Soto woman, who is currently looking for ways to express herself and find meaning through ritual.

Today, many Soto women in the U.S. are exploring Soto religious life conscious of their gender and are embracing their femaleness. As Bynum (1992) argued, “All human beings are gendered” and many American Soto women are embracing their gender and allowing their “practice to unfold accordingly” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). Schireson believes it is important that she practice as herself, and encourages other women to practice becoming “the Buddha that they are, not some imitation of what they think a Zen person is supposed to look like” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). For Schireson, practicing as herself means honoring commitments as a wife, mother, and grandmother, as well as occasionally wearing earrings and lipstick with her Soto robes, when she prefers to be “pretty” rather than strictly monastic-like (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). Similarly, Levie has found herself experimenting with presenting herself in a more feminine way, after she felt that she needed to “reclaim a kind of feminine expression” by

“wearing more colors [and] wearing jewelry” which is not the typical look of a Soto priest (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011).

While Schireson and others have found ways of expressing their practice as women, many women in this study still find that traditional Soto practice has somehow not addressed their needs as women. When Wendy Nakao was in her 30s, her teacher, Maezumi Roshi asked her, “What does it mean to be a woman practicing Zen?” (W. Nakao, personal communication, March 28, 2011). Nakao had never really thought about this prior to his question because she never thought of herself as being “‘less than’ in terms of opportunity,” but, upon reflection, believes that her “own deeply held sense of ‘less than’ was always operative” (W. Nakao, personal communication, March 28, 2011). For Nakao, traditional Soto ritual practices brought her into a “neutral zone, gender wise,” though clearly she still internalized an inherent lack in her understanding of her practice as a woman. Something about the tradition made her feel that the male Zen teachers were the standard that she could never aspire to.

Nakao is not alone in her feelings that Soto is an inherently masculine tradition. Early in Teijo Munnich’s Soto career, she felt that, “Somehow, [Soto] was lacking something that women [had] to offer” (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). She thought, “There must be something about this style that was developed in a particularly masculine way” (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010).

A one-time dancer, Munnich equates this issue to learning choreography:

There were some teachers that I’d have where what they choreographed was totally natural, and there were other teachers where I’d have to work at it. It wasn’t



natural for me to do it. So, I've always felt that Zen is choreographed in such a way that there is something about it that just isn't natural for me, and I'm just sort of looking for another choreographic style. (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010).

Munnich began looking into making Soto Zen more accessible for women, because she found that there were relatively few women coming to her for instruction and involved in the practice, and she questioned what it would be like if women were grouped together to practice (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). The answer to her question was her development of Great Tree Women's Temple, as a place to explore Dogen's Soto Zen in an all female practice setting.

While Dogen's ideas are very much a part of daily life for the nuns in Japan, his ideas are understood differently in the U.S., though still very much respected. Many of the women in this study are impressed with his essays and chant his writings as a part of their practice. Still, although his rules for monastic behavior are referred to at Tassajara Monastery, many women's lives there do not resemble his ideals for proper monastics. Though for many Soto women in this study, "bringing Soto forth in the West is more about making it useful and applicable than about bringing forth the true Dogen Zenji way," Dogen's influence as a great Zen master is evident (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011).

### **Altering Traditional Monastic Rituals**

Many of Dogen's monastic ritual practices are often altered by women in the U.S., allowing women to navigate Western life and express their Zen in a more personal fashion. One such ritual that is often altered is head shaving. While it is not required of

ordained women in the U.S. the way it is at the main convent in Japan, it is still necessary when anyone participates in the Dharma transmission ceremony, which marks the time when a disciple is recognized as a transmitting teacher in her own right, if this event is to be recognized by Sotoshu Headquarters in Japan (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). As a result, at the beginning of their ordained careers, all priests must shave their heads at least once.

The women in this study who do continue to shave their heads discussed an appreciation of not having to deal with hair and gratitude for the practice of letting go. Catherine Hondorp shaved her head for ten years and found this to be a “very important and valuable practice” (C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011). While Teijo Munich also found the practice of letting go to be valuable, and one that has to be personally experienced, shaving her head also taught her that her “that the feminine is on the inside” (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). When she first shaved her head, she was embarrassed and felt that she looked like a boy. However, in time, she realized that her hair was not the defining feature of her femininity and has embraced both her shaved head and her femininity in more profound ways. Perhaps this is what Arai (2008) is speaking of when she says that rituals often accomplish things that are not intentionally sought but deeply wanted. Though Munnich may not have been seeking to embrace a deeper understanding of her femininity through the ritual act of head shaving, because ritual actions affect the body in ways that the participant may not be aware of, Munnich was transformed by the ritual in deeper ways than she had originally anticipated.

Many of the women in this study have shaved their heads, but currently do not, preferring instead to keep their hair short. A predominant reason why women choose this route is, often, to more easily blend in with society, noting the awkwardness of navigating through life in the U.S. with no hair. Wendy Nakao, abbot of the Zen Center of Los Angeles, is now trimming her short hair after shaving it for many years and says that she is enjoying “blending into everything” (W. Nakao, personal communication, March 28, 2011). Julie Terestman, priest at the Village Zendo in Manhattan, shaved her head for the first time when she received the precepts, but found it to be “very disturbing to some of those close to [her]” (J. Terestman, personal communication, March 31, 2011). She found that a shaved head just got in the way as “endless comments and discussions” were made about her head, which she found detracted from her message (J. Terestman, personal communication, March 31, 2011). As a result, she let her hair grow back in and has kept it short ever since finding this a more suitable expression of her Zen which allows others to interact more comfortably with her.

Many of the women discussed feeling like an “other...,being on the outside...,and hav[ing] people wonder whether you...are some weirdo or what”(C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011). Meg Levie notes that even when wearing monastic clothing, “people often have a strong negative reaction” toward “others,” especially women, with shaved heads (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011). Many of the women found that people often thought they had cancer and were in chemotherapy treatments, which makes the woman’s appearance an “almost frightening thing” for some people and one that Schireson doesn’t think is helpful to the women (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011).

The idea of blending into society is especially important when a woman is a priest who is trying to traverse life with a young child, as was the case for priest Meg Levie. She was ordained, and therefore was required to shave her head, when she had a two-year-old child starting day care. While she says that in some ways it was a wonderful practice, she admits it was challenging. Levie's major concern was "taking on these two major archetypes of monk and mother at the same time...it was definitely a struggle for me," she says (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011). Because of the strong association in the West with monasticism and celibacy, Levie says she often "didn't feel quite comfortable" being out in the world with a shaved head and dropping her young child off at day care (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011). Still, she is glad she went through the ceremony and may consider shaving again in the future if she decides to practice more monastically now that her daughter is older.

This ritual of head shaving is predominantly an issue more for American monastic women to navigate than it is for monastic men. Though male priests also shave their heads, "it doesn't have the same meaning that it does for women" (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). Many men keep short to buzzed hair anyway, and "many lose their hair," so for men, shaving their heads does not have the same potential social stigma that it can for women. As Munnich points out, in Japan, when a woman walks "down the street with a bald head," people "[bow] to you because they know what it means" (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). In most places in the U.S., that is not the case. On the other hand, Levie remarks that seeing a person on the street who is clearly a practicing Buddhist "creates opportunity for people" to begin to examine their own lives, as the Buddha did when he had his initial four reminders that

started him on his spiritual path—seeing an old person, a sick person, a corpse, and a spiritually devoted person (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011).

The other monastic vow that Dogen commented on and that many American women are reinterpreting is ritual celibacy. Though some women have not formally taken this vow, they are celibate in the sense that they choose not to have a partner to more fully commit themselves to their practice and their *sangha*. This is not to say that these women do not have maternal instincts or an appreciation for being in a relationship. Both De La Rosa and Munnich fall into this category and though both expressed inclinations toward motherhood, especially if they were with a partner, both feel that this would draw their attention in too many directions. De La Rosa remarked, “When you have a family, you have to be divided” (De La Rosa, personal communication, January 26, 2011). Munnich agrees, adding that in America, being a working mother is not “such an odd thing” (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). Essentially, that is what a Soto priest with a child is--a working mother. “Women try to do that all the time,” Munnich explains. “Whether or not they are successful is another question” (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010).

Women in this study who have chosen to be priests and mothers work hard at making their choices a success, although Schireson believes that women are “biologically wired to multi-task and to care for others at the same time” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). Still, she does admit that challenges arise in honoring all of one’s vows and commitments. Though her schedule is often a juggling act, she manages to find ways of honoring all her vows, to both her family and her *sangha*, and feels that this models an important lesson for everyone in her life—“that the

center of their lives are the commitments and vows they've made to the people in their lives who they are in relationship to, and that they need to find ways to deepen their practice without pushing anything off the agenda or pushing anyone aside" (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). Schireson feels that "if you have a life that includes a spouse and children and grandchildren, then that's your life and how you live that life is also an expression of Buddha dharma" (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011).

Having a family while trying to be a Soto priest, Levie notes, has "definitely been disruptive" to her Soto practice, but her desire to have a child was a physical "expression that really would not be denied" (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011). Though admittedly disruptive, Levie finds her choice to also be a "very strong and powerful" application of her Soto Zen practice (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011). Being an ordained wife and mother may fall under what Northup (1997) refers to when she discusses domestic duties as falling under the category of ritual in women's lives. Not practicing ritual celibacy, these women are instead reexamining the monastic vows they took, in consideration of their gender and environment, and have made the personal choice to commit themselves to both monastic and family vows. Their familial vows, as an expression of their Zen practice, becomes an alternate form of ritual. As a result, parenting and the domestic acts that accompany this role become ritualized in light of the women's Zen vows.

### **Changing the Liturgy**

Language is powerful; American Soto women are using the language in rituals to create a stronger sense of inclusion in the tradition and to commemorate the Soto women

before them who had been forgotten. Furthermore, American Soto women are addressing modern women's needs by reexamining the liturgy of Soto Zen and neutralizing the androcentric bias that has been a part of the tradition for many years. However, In refining these practices, women sometimes "need to remove gendered language, but in other cases it might be helpful to retain or add specific references to gender" (Gross, 2009, p. 261).

Crawford and Unger (2004) understand that "controversies over terminology can sometimes be hairsplitting, but [that] language and naming are powerful" (p. 23). Traditionally, gender classification through language tends to "confer more power on males" because the use of androcentric language, which permeates most of the globe, "omits important aspects of female experience" (p. 23). Omitting the female experience is a lack of naming, and this unnamed reality becomes "less visible, and therefore, in a sense, less real to the social world" (p. 23). When things are named, they become real and language can be used to "allow people to share experiences and teach others to name their own experiences in the same way" (p. 23). There is even research that shows that using "generic masculine language leads people of both sexes to think more about males," thus omitting the female experience (p. 23).

Naming is an important element of Soto ritual as names are chanted in liturgies as official lineages and as formal recognition. Traditionally, priests have many names which are given out for various occasions including ordination and *dharma* transmission ceremonies, commemorations of the first place a teacher taught, and respectful observances after a teacher's death (Tisdale, 1996, p. 24). As a result, many male Zen teachers can have four names, while most historical Zen women are only known "by a

single name” (p. 24). Historically, many female Zen teachers were never given second names, and though some women kept their family names, these are not considered “proper names for chanting” (p. 24). As a result, many female Zen teachers, until only a few generations back, have been lost to history, and many “distinguishing female characteristics seem to disappear in the light of Zen” (Schireson, 2009, p. 10).

The issue of language in titles is something that the nuns in Japan have dealt with as part of their fight for equality. In Japanese, *so* refers to any “ordained member of the Buddhist community” because the term is non-gendered (Arai, 1999, p. 14). In Japanese Soto Zen, the prefix *ni*, referring to female, was added to *so* to refer specifically to female monastics, while male monastics are simply referred to as *so*. The Japanese nuns recommended that the male prefix *nan*, or male, be added to *so* to indicate a male monastic, just as a prefix was added to refer to a female monastic. This addition would have kept the term monastic neutral and genderized it in both directions, rather than simply designating female and having the male be the standard, as is so often the case in organized religions (Aria, 1999).

However, this desire was not fulfilled and instead, in 1986, the rule-making body of the Soto sect, the Sotoshu Administration, in an alleged attempt to make the sect even more gender-inclusive, altogether abolished the use of the reference *ni* to identify female priests (p. 24). The nuns were extremely upset by this because without this identifier, it is nearly impossible to distinguish gender from their given Buddhist names, resulting in Japanese monastic women essentially being erased from the official books. According to Arai (1999), as a result, it has become increasingly difficult to gather data on the



activities and contributions of monastic women” (p. 74). Removing the female gendered prefix has, essentially, removed the nuns’ contributions altogether.

The American Soto women in this study have also had to deal with the issue of titles. Because in the U.S. there are so many different options for what to call oneself, women have given a great deal of thought to what title they prefer. Munnich, for example, uses the title of priest, because she says it is less gender-specific, which in the U.S. it is. Schireson was using the term nun, but was told by some American practitioners that this alluded to her being celibate, which she is not. While celibacy for a nun may be imperative within Christian and Catholic denominations, in Soto Zen, as the Meiji era proclamations decreed, and in the U.S. especially, celibacy is not a requirement. However, in the states, this is not general knowledge and to avoid confusion or perceived misrepresentation, Schireson now refers to herself as abbess.

Women may often additionally refer to themselves as head teacher or *dharma* holder, which helps show their rank in their lineage’s hierarchy while remaining genderless. This study found that most American women in the Soto tradition refer to themselves, in their official titles, by using their Buddhist name, a non-gendered word given to them by their teacher, their given American name, probably to designate themselves as female, and their last names, along with the title or rank of their position within their temple, such as abbess, priest, or head teacher.

Though the Japanese nuns dealt with an androcentric bias in their titles when the sect administration removed the female suffix from their names, the Japanese language is not as androcentric as English and instead, “lends itself greatly in making very little distinction to gender” (P. Bennage, personal communication, March 7, 2011). Therefore,

when the Zen sutras were translated from Japanese into English, once non-gendered Japanese nouns became gendered English pronouns (P. Arai, personal communication, June 22, 2011). This is a major concern for ordained American Soto Zen women. The *sutras* that are chanted daily or for special occasions have mostly been translated with an androcentric bias and many Soto women are working to change the language to be more inclusive of women.

The various Soto Zen temples around the U.S. all use different versions of translated *sutras* from “different traditions and different temple families [with] different emphasis” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). While the Japanese versions are the same, the English versions are all a little different. Sometimes the translation is different, and sometimes the women further change the translation to make it more accessible to their *sangha*. For example, at Schireson’s temple, a passage from a *sutra* that was originally translated as, “All Buddhas, ten directions, three times” has been revised to say: “all Buddhas, ten directions, past, present, and future” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). Schireson figured most people “didn’t know what ‘three times’ was, so [she] used ‘past present and future’” instead (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). For Schireson, it is important that her *sangha* understand and relate to the message of the *sutras*, not simply recite them because they were handed down.

Besides issues of clarity, most of the women interviewed for this study have participated in changing the liturgy at their temples to remove the androcentric bias that, according to Bynum (1992), gave men authority in the religion. Patricia Bennage explained that she altered an English translation of the Avalokiteshvara *Bodhisattva*

Universal Gateway Chapter of the Lotus *Sutra*. This *Bodhisattva* is considered androgynous, though the sutra books Bennage was consulting used the pronoun “he.” Bennage “re-wrote it as ‘s/he’” and says that some days she and her *sangha* chant “he” and on others they chant “she.” (P. Bennage, personal communication, March 7, 2011).

Similarly, Munnich changed her translation of the Heart *Sutra*, which “used to have ‘he’ all over it” to a more gender neutral version and sometimes she uses a version that has she or her as the pronouns because it “evokes something different” for her (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). Munnich said that she “used to say ‘he’ is just a general term, [like] mankind, but, when you use ‘she’ or ‘woman’ instead of ‘man,’ it does feel different” (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). The result of removing androcentric language allows women to feel more included in the religion because they hear and speak words that refer to them as women. Women are named in the *sutras*, and that legitimizes their experience for others who hear it while giving authority back to the women in the tradition.

Women are also adding more feminine images to the liturgy, in particular to the *eko*, or morning dedication during Soto services. According to Meg Levie at Green Gulch Farm Zen Center, the first female ancestor and first woman in the sangha, Mahaprajapati, the Buddha’s aunt, is a recent addition to the morning *eko* (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011). Levie believes this is a unique American revision and “doubt[s] that it is included in Japan” (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011). Likewise, Schireson begins her *eko* list, “not with the Buddha, but with Tara, as the mother of all Buddhas” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). Here, the *Bodhisattva* Tara is given first position to recognize the

role of the mother and females as being just as important as the male ancestors or *Bodhisattvas*. Schireson has also noticed that many Zen centers are frequently adding a line to the *eko* which is dedicated “to the female ancestors in their lineage” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). While some would argue that this may be overwriting too much of the original tradition, Northup (1997) argues that inserting women into religious worship is an important component of women’s ritualizing. This study found that American Soto women feel the inclusion of women and the feminine in the tradition is a natural recognition of traditional and historical elements that were overlooked by males.

The idea of using the term “ancestors” to refer to historical Zen teachers rather than the androcentric patriarch is another key issue for many American Soto women. Munnich revealed that she has “a hard time saying patriarch,” so she, like many of the women in this study, has replaced it with the less gendered term “ancestor,” even though she “know[s] that Buddha was called patriarch” (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010).

Though this term is increasingly replacing the gendered “patriarch” and though females in the lineage are being venerated, the official Soto Zen lineage is “entirely male without exceptions,” with only a few women added from the latest generations (Tisdale, 2006, p. 18). As Zen scholar Miriam Levering (2000) phrased it: “The ancestral line is a patriline” (p. 159). No continuous line of female teachers has survived dating back to the Buddha and Mahaprajapati. This has left many Zen women wondering, “Was it really all men or is it an idea that it was all men?” (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010).

Research confirms that it was not really all men. Many historical female Soto teachers chose female *dharma* heirs to continue their teachings, but usually these lines only lasted for a couple of generations, due to “institutional and cultural resistance” (Tisdale, 2006, p. 19). Still, women have always practiced Zen, so a woman’s line of some kind has always existed (p. 19). Schireson believes that it is unhealthy to “see the patriarchal lineage as reproducing itself” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). She feels that even if there were no female teachers, the feminine should be represented and respected because all the patriarchs came from women and had relationships with women, most importantly their mothers.

In an attempt to bring the female ancestors into the lives of modern Soto practitioners, Schireson, together with Soto Zen Buddhist, Sally Tisdale embarked on a project to create a chant to parallel the male ancestor chant that honors the matriarchs of Zen, including women from India, China, and Japan, (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). There were several requirements for inclusion in this group of women, one of which was that the women had to be historically traceable “through scholarly sources,” so something about their life and “teaching words” could be known (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). However, despite the scholarly sources used for this project, such a list could not officially be known as a woman’s lineage because some within the sect felt that adding female transmission documents, or an official female lineage with papers, to the male ones that had been passed down in the tradition for centuries, wasn’t appropriate (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). As a result, this list of female teachers was officially called a women’s ancestor document, not a women’s lineage. However,

Schireson emphasized to the Soto Zen Buddhist Association that once the document is made and disseminated, “people will use it as they wish...[perhaps even] as a document of transmission and a lineage document,” which the Association understood and agreed with (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). The female ancestors document is now often given out during *Jukai*, priest ordination ceremonies, along with the male transmission documents. Schireson gives her students a document of the male lineage and female ancestors with her name and the name of her student written on both documents, “so they get both sides of the transmission of Zen” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011).

Moreover, the female ancestors’ chant is used in different ways by different Zen centers, depending on preference and how much time is allotted for the service. At Green Gulch, Meg Levie says they alternate chanting the men and then the women’s line every other day, while at Tassajara, they chant both sets everyday. Both Wendy Nakao and Catherine Hondorp use a women’s ancestor chant at their respective temples, which they feel speaks to the female practitioners and represents the feminine in a way that other traditional Soto rituals do not.

While American Soto women yearn for “a broader sense of the historical picture” of women’s involvement in Zen so that they may show appreciation of their ancestor’s contributions, this chant also allows modern Soto women to “feel a connection” with the historical women (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011). Furthermore, according to Bennage, reciting the women’s ancestor chant brings up a feeling of “specialness...add[ing] to [a] feeling of being included” (P. Bennage, personal communication, March 7, 2011). This sense of being recognized is powerful because by

recognizing their predecessors, modern Soto Zen women are, in affect, recognizing themselves on a more intimate level.

While traditional lineage is still an important Soto concept, the female ancestor document is just as important in that it includes women and “expand[s] [their] understanding of what lineage can mean” (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011). For Levering (2000), chanting a family tree, rather than a direct line, would more accurately recognize the many women who “contributed most to the awakening of male teachers and the spiritual potential of women” (pp. 165, 166). Since many teachers designated more than one dharma heir, and many of these designations have fallen to women, Levering suggests “recognizing the dharma-sisters, the dharma-aunts, [and] the dharma-nieces” who because they were not the first appointed dharma heir, usually never [got] acknowledged (p. 162). Though this understanding of lineage would “represent a fundamental shift in the Chan/Zen ‘theology’ of lineage transmission,” Levering feels it would more realistically depict gender in the Zen tradition (p. 165). Similarly, Buddhist scholar Trudy Goodman recognizes that lineage, as it is interpreted in America today, does not simply refer to the Buddha and Zen masters, but instead encompasses the wholeness of their lives including their “family albums” (Sidor, 1987, p. 4). To illustrate, she recalls a woman who once gave a dharma talk and opened with a chant of the names of the “many important women in her life” (p. 4).

As the ancestor’s chant suggests, historically there were women practicing Zen, though these women were never properly “recognized, and therefore not [well] recorded” for future generations to study (Gross, 2009, p. 286). As a result, within Buddhism at large, many women have brought up the issue of a lack of female role models. Within

more modern times, Zen women have longed for role models to help guide them in how a woman is to “juggle...community life, jobs, families, [and] relationships” while still maintaining a strong Zen practice as either a lay practitioner or an ordained priest (Sidor, 1987, p. xix). Role models who resonate with modern Zen women are important because as one Zen practitioner and mother points out:

It’s easier for me to identify with the life of [Siddhartha’s] wife, left behind with her child, than with the young man going off to seek a spiritual life...How could I choose a spiritual practice whose founder left his family without a word in the middle of the night to seek his way? (Chavis, 1996, p. 117)

Unfortunately, the women that Schireson and Tisdale uncovered for the female ancestor’s chant did not leave behind any information on “how they found their way in such difficult times” and so Schireson wonders how far such role models can serve modern Zen women (Schireson, 2009, p. 10). Still, American Soto women need to be exposed to the fact that other women did practice in more turbulent times than this, and this in itself may help American Soto women find their own way.

Nevertheless, American Soto practitioners do not appear to be the only ones with a chant honoring female ancestors. According to Arai, the nuns in Japan also recognize “the women who have come before them,” though this practice is not likely to occur in the male monasteries (P. Arai, personal communication, June 22, 2011).

It appears that for Soto Zen women, Japanese and American, there is liberation in knowing and saying aloud the names of women who have come before them in the tradition (Levering, 2006, p. 156). Showing respect and reverence for female ancestors empowers modern Soto women to continue on their spiritual path with the knowledge



that they follow in a long line of women who have faced similar obstacles. As Northup (1997) points out, these women are “heros and leaders” whose experience and wisdom is sought by moderns (p. 35). The naming of female ancestors essentially provides role models for modern Zen women, and in the naming of predecessors, helps woman acknowledge their own practice and place in the lineage.

### **Evoking the Feminine**

Some of the ritual practices of ordained American Soto Zen women are also practiced, in part, to evoke the feminine and feminine qualities despite the tension that results from attempting to narrowly define the term feminine. By focusing on the feminine, American practitioners may be “obscuring the dynamic complexity of individuals by reducing them to a single label or set of labels” and from a Buddhist perspective may be “obscure[ing] the vastness of who we are” (as cited in Mrozik, 2008, p. 13). Many reject the notion that “all women at all times possess certain intrinsically female qualities,” arguing that “the association of such qualities with women is largely a matter of historical, cultural, and social convention” (Mrozik, 2008, p. 12). However, as Bynum (1992) asserts, everyone is gendered and this must be taken into account when studying religion and rituals, then without falling into the trap of stereotype, it is fair to propose that some qualities are considered more feminine than others, perhaps because women have traditionally, for a myriad of reasons, from biological processes to cultural conditioning, tended to exhibit these qualities more often than men.

Though defining women as a set of characteristics may be an essentialistic representation of the sexes, many Buddhists would agree that male and female bodies in the world have different energies and “different ways of expressing [Buddhist teachings]

in the world” (Dharma, 1987, p. 98). In fact, many traditionally accepted feminine traits such as “gentleness, modesty, humility, obedience, and selflessness” are, in Buddhism, deemed “desirable virtues for both men and women” (Mrozik, J, 12). At the same time, traditional and formal Zen ceremonies may be considered, by some, to be more masculine, but as Meg Levie ponders, is this true or “just our association?” (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011).

For Gross (2009), the question is not whether men and women are different, because she believes they are, but whether all men and all women are the same. Gross disagrees that “any essential nature or traits can be ascribed to all women” (p. 18). Indeed, such a statement would be an absolute that cannot be validated. Traits cannot be ascribed to all women, though some traits may be ascribed to some women some of the time. For example, because women are the sex that bears and often raises children, they are traditionally ascribed the role of mother (Yuko, 1998, p. 78). This is not to say that all women are maternal, but that gendered characteristics are often the result of natural and biological tendencies and requirements. As American Soto women create new ritual forms or alter existing forms, they are finding ways that “integrate rather than avoid, their female bodies and experience” (Ikea Nash, 2000, p. 299). This supports Sered’s findings that “gender has a significant--although not absolute or universal--impact on...the form and interpretation of the rituals performed” (as cited in Northup, 1997, p. 5).

The idea that women tend to exhibit certain qualities is not a Western imposition. Many cultures and religions around the globe have representations of women that overlap. In India, where Buddhism began, the major religion of Hinduism portrays women in various ways, from “strong matriarchs and vulnerable girls” to “goddesses and

daemons” (Ruparell, 2001, p. 184). Nonetheless, overall the “feminine principle is worshiped in many forms,” even being associated with nature, most importantly as the Ganges River, “considered an especially sacred female presence” (Fisher, 2008, pp. 86, 87). This is not unique to Hinduism, as many religions associate the feminine with nature, hence the term, “Mother Nature.”

The feminine is also represented as goddesses in Hinduism. There are hundreds of goddesses, with each village honoring its own specific goddess who is “intimately concerned with village affairs,” alluding to the notion that women are more concerned with community (Fisher, 2008, p. 86). In addition, the female consorts to the three main gods, Shiva, Vishnu and Bahama, are important goddesses who embody the creative life force or *shakti* that the gods use in creation. Without the female force, the gods are without power, which may be a metaphor for women as mothers and the life giving force.

Similarly, Daoism, which is the native religion in China and the one from which, some believe, Japanese Zen picked up many elements, “recognizes the balance of male and female” as the two forces of Yin and Yang energies (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). A balancing of these two forces is said to bring about “the way,” or Dao (Fisher, 2008, p. 183). Literally translated as “shadow and light,...[these two forces] are sometimes described as female and male” with Yin represented as the “dark, receptive, female aspect” (Leung, 2001, p. 252). Here the feminine is associated with being fluid and approachable, and as the dark element, is associated with the moon, perhaps alluding to the female cycles of menstruation.

Clearly, the idea that women are associated with certain characteristics is not new, nor is it Western, although many American Buddhist women acknowledge and embrace

their differences from men. Sally Tisdale (1996) recognizes that “femaleness and maleness are simply social constructs,” however she finds joy in practicing with women as “a community with a common language...and shared experience” (p. 15). Women often find that out of their own self-doubts an opportunity for more interaction and discourse can surface where a “genuine openness, [and an] unapologetic, strong vulnerability” can naturally emerge, allowing women to express their “authentic female voice” (Goodman, 2000, p. 173).

Despite recognition of the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness which teaches that there is “neither male nor female” and that form is emptiness and emptiness, form, most of the women in this study acknowledge that their present condition is that of a woman, and that with this form comes certain traits. Feelings of community and relationships were a common theme in the participants’ descriptions of practicing with and learning from women. Moreover, Schireson explained that all males have feminine characteristics, such as “nurturing and relationship aspects,” that need to be balanced along with “male characteristics of initiative and independence” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). In the end, Schireson contends that not acknowledging the feminine or females of Zen not only leaves out a group of people, but also “parts of people that need to be developed” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011).

Furthermore, the women in this study discussed the fact that being a woman does influence their teaching styles and interactions. Nakao feels that “expressing feminine energies comes naturally and so permeates how [she] practice[s] and teach[es]” (W. Nakao, personal communication, March 28, 2011). One expression of the feminine is a more horizontal, less hierarchical approach to teaching. As Northup (1997), points out,

this community-oriented focus is “balanced against a recognition of diversity” that values individual expression (p. 34). This idea is evident in Hondorp’s experience, in which having a female teacher and being herself a Soto teacher helps her find that “there’s a sense of individual practice and expression...very much an emphasis on the expression of the individual” that arises when women are teachers (C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011). Through this emphasis on the individual, a community is created in which those individuals contribute to the whole. Hondorp, whose teacher was a woman, felt that her teacher taught with a keen awareness of such dynamics, emphasizing a sense of “safety and intimacy that perhaps would not be available” at an institution with a male figure head (C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011). Instruction of this kind, Hondorp believes, positively affected her learning and in turn how she teaches, as she feels it was a “great opening” compared to her early practice with male teachers (C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011). Women’s ability to create a safe and intimate place to practice Zen may be one reason why women tend to open their own temples. Schireson believes that women “know how to create a home” and perhaps because of this, many women are open to and successful in establishing their own home temple (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011).

Additionally, American Soto Zen women are adaptable, tailoring experiences to suit their and their students’ needs. Aware that different people need different expressions from their teachers, Bennage recognizes that what she represents to different people changes, depending on what the student needs. For example, if a student seems to need a feminine representation, Bennage says, she is that for them, however, she says she feels

just as comfortable not taking on a feminine role and instead serving her *sangha* from a more neutral gendered place (P. Bennage, personal communication, March 7, 2011). On the other hand, Terestman does not feel she necessarily represents the feminine and does not much consider her gender “in relation to the form of practice”; she finds that in a mixed group of women and men of differing nationalities, gender does not often come up as an issue (J. Terestman, personal communication, March 31, 2011).

While in community-oriented groups, American Soto women are using ritual to help them evoke the feminine in their practice of formal Soto ceremonies. Often, a ceremony for Mahaprajapati, the first woman in the sangha, is performed, which “honors her role in initiating the Buddhist women’s ordained sangha” (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011). The ceremony is similar to the *Anan Kosheiki* that is practiced by some of the women in this study, as well as the nuns in Japan, which thanks Ananda for helping to persuade the Buddha to allow women into the *sangha*. Though in Japan, that ceremony is only performed at the women’s convent, both men and women may participate in the Mahaprajapati ceremony in the states. This formal ritual is used to show gratitude to female ancestors and advocates. As Northup (1997) explains, women’s “telling, repeating, and recording” of other women’s stories is a crucial element in the ritual lives of women (p. 35). The coming together of women to perform these ceremonies affects the women by making them feel a part of something and allowing their own expression of gratitude to come forth.

#### **Use of the Prajnaparamita Sutra.**

Another of the traditional Soto rituals that American Soto women practice that they feel evokes the feminine is the chant to *Prajnaparamita*, the mother of the Buddhas, and

one of the two “major Mahayana feminine personifications” (Gross, 1993, p. 76). The *Prajnaparamita* is not a deity, and is not personified in the sutra, though she is “clearly imaged as feminine” (Barnes, 1987, p. 122). However, *Prajnaparamita* goes “beyond the maternal” to embody “the perfection of wisdom, the blissful, the compassionate, the instructor, and friend revealing the world of truth” (Paul, 1985, p. 60). Her image is found in the sutras not as “a savior to whom one can appeal..., but a vision of the goal” (Gross, 1993, p. 76). With *Prajnaparamita*, “the [image is] already embedded within the existing rituals and ceremonies” and this gives “women material to work with” (Levering & Schireson, 2006, p. 643). The femininity ascribed to *Prajnaparamita* is often postulated to be due to the grammatical aspect of her Sanskrit name. The word, “*Prajna*,” meaning wisdom, is grammatically feminine in Sanskrit (Gross, 1993, p. 76). However, despite this feminine root and association, the *Prajnaparamita* Sutra asserts “that all apparent characteristics of being are illusory” (Barnes, 1987, p. 118).

Almost all the women in this study refer to the *Prajnaparamita* as a focal point for embracing and celebrating the feminine. Although understood as beyond gender, *Prajnaparamita* nevertheless evokes in many American Soto Zen women a connection as female and mother, as a being of compassion and one of wisdom. Though the nuns in Japan do not seem to have this same affiliation to her, American Soto women definitely relate to this figure.

### **Female bodhisattvas on altars.**

The women of this study also related to the images of the Bodhisattvas of Kuan Yin and Tara, who sit on the altars in many of these women’s temples. Schireson has a Tara on her altar and Levie says that at Tassajara monastery, there are both a Kuan Yin and a

Tara statue (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011; M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011). Munnich also has a Kuan Yin statue on her altar at Great Tree (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). These Bodhisattvas are physical representations of the feminine that sit on altars and look over the *zendo* where all ceremonies and rituals take place.

The *Bodhisattva* of Tara is a Tibetan deity, who during her life as a woman was told by monks that she should take a male birth the next time around, but responded by saying that since “there is no distinction between male and female,” she would “take female form continuously through her long career as an advanced Bodhisattva” (Gross, 2009, pp. 292, 293). The Bodhisattva Kuan Yin was originally considered a male in India, known as Avalokitesvara. She became female when she entered China (Reed, 1992, p. 160). As this female manifestation, Kuan Yin is among the most loved *Bodhisattvas* in the East (Gross, 1993). She was later transplanted to Japan where she became known as Kannon (Paul, 1985). The nuns in Japan have a statue of Kannon on their altar (Arai, 1999, p. 106). As a female personification, Kuan Yin is said to appear in thirty-three forms, all of them female, but is most popularly depicted as “a slender, white-robed...figure who usually carries a white lotus in her left hand” (Paul, 1985, p. 252). She is also sometimes depicted with a “water jug or a small child in her arms or near her feet” (p. 252). Like other *Bodhisattvas*, Kuan Yin transcends her gender, yet at the same time she represents the feminine and the maternal, as a “savior from suffering” who “embodies and personifies compassion” (Reed, 1992, p. 176; Gross, 1993, p. 75). Most importantly for women, she is said to save women from the “suffering arising out of their female birth” which includes things like “arranged marriages, sexual attacks, the pain and



stigma of both menstruation and childbirth, and the powerlessness of childlessness in a patriarchal society” (Reed, 1992, p. 176).

According to Kurtz (2007), people can approach a female *bodhisattva* like Kuan Yin or Tara as an individual, because female deities are understood to be “moved more by a worshipper’s devotion and dependence” than male deities, who act as “officials responding to justice and bribes and promises of payment” (p. 237). Therefore, female deities “facilitate the empowerment of women in religious life in a way that is difficult for the male deities” (p. 238).

For the Soto Zen women in the U.S., female *Bodhisattvas* show them that women can and have achieved enlightenment. Women need to know that not all enlightened beings were men and they need some physical representation of this. This returns to the idea of women needing role models. According to Gross (2009), “It is impossible to argue that role models who look like oneself make no difference” (p. 285). Role models do make a difference to women who “express their deepest hopes for social transformation” in part through venerating enlightened female deities (Kurtz, 2007, p. 238). This is what Northup (1997) refers to when she suggests that “only the contemplation of a female deity can resonate with [women’s] spiritual intuition” (p. 12). Seeing only male figures, and chanting only the names of male ancestors cannot fully resonate with women. No matter how much a woman may aspire to practice beyond her gender, the psyche is affected when the practitioner’s gender is never included in the tradition.

### **Native American circles.**

Another ritual that draws on women's femininity is the use of Native American circles and councils as a horizontal and more feminine approach to structured practice. According to Nakao, who uses circles frequently at her Zen center, "in council, everyone sits in a circle and abides by the guidelines of creating an empty space, speaking from the heart, listening from the heart, respecting silence, and speaking one's truth without preparation" (personal communication, March 28, 2011). Nakao says she has integrated this ritual into her Zen practice as integrally as sitting *zazen* (W. Nakao, personal communication, March 28, 2011). Similarly, Hondrop and Levie engage in council, or sharing circles, that focus on a certain theme and allow for a "kind of communication and talking" amongst practitioners that is not often seen in classic Soto temples (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011). However, not all American Zen centers engage in this kind of horizontal leadership and engagement. De La Rosa "respect[s] what people do," but in trying to follow Dogen as closely as she can, she does not incorporate rituals outside of traditional Soto ones (S. De La Rosa, personal communication, January 26, 2011). Nevertheless, those that do find the experience to be a natural incorporation into and expression of Zen.

This kind of religious ritual practice, where women's and men's voices are listened to and acknowledged in a safe environment of non-hierarchical relationships, provides women with opportunities to explore "liberating roles, pathways to self-transformation, and image construction" that may not be present in traditional Soto rituals like *zazen* (Hunt, 2002, p. 165). Levie finds that at her temple, "There is more room for expression, emotion, [and] wider communication," than she has seen in traditional Soto practice,

which may be understood as a more feminine approach, however she notes that this could be influenced by “our time in history, our psychology, a different culture,” or a combination of factors (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011). This horizontal approach with council circles is an American addition. The nuns in Japan follow a strict hierarchical system that originated in Chinese Buddhist monasteries (Arai, 1999). In such a system, the group is favored over “independent entities,” to show how all of life is interrelated (Arai, 1999, p. 85). Despite the reasons behind such practices, the majority of American women in this study clearly believe in community building by beginning with the individual.

While men and women tend to practice together in the states, most of the women in this study agree that a woman’s “practice needs are best met in women’s settings” (P. Bennage, personal communication, March 7, 2011). This understanding is one reason why Munnich created a temple specifically for women. She found herself “influenced and affected by the masculine side of Zen” (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). She finds that when women practice with other women, “there’s a certain dynamic,...a different kind of conversation” than when men are present— “something different may come up” (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). Indeed, in practicing in groups of all women, Hondorp has found, “a sense of ease of process” comes along with it (C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011). Perhaps what occurs when women practice together is, as Sandy Boucher phrased it, that a woman may

...take herself seriously as a human being...[believing] messages she gets *from her own deepest, most authentic experience*, rather than believing what is told about

herself; to go past her own internalized sexism in order to respect and join with other women for support and possible collective action. (Boucher, 1993, p. 4)

Returning to Bell's (1992) theory that ritual constructs power relationships, women coming together through Native American ritual councils or simply to practice together create bonds between each other and validate their own experience. Without the hierarchical structure often seen in male-run temples, women's more horizontal and community-oriented approach equal value on each individual and experience. As a result, the individual is validated, creating an empowered group, which in turn empowers the individual.

#### **Use of bodywork.**

American Soto women also evoke the feminine in their rituals by incorporating various kinds of bodywork into their Soto practice. Munnich believes that even in the U.S., "women are not as aware of their bodies as they can be," and tries to incorporate "a more feminine, relaxed...body awareness...into this practice" (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). Likewise, Hondorp, a chiropractor by trade, is well aware of the importance that attention to the body plays in a person's well-being and approaches her teaching with this in mind (C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011). American's "culture of connecting to t.v. and electronics and distraction and busyness," tends to "move from its head," not the body (C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011). For her and many women in this study, "exploring how the body wakes up" is a critical part of Zen practice that was perhaps "taken for granted" in an Asian culture where "the practice was [more] embodied" (C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011). Schireson sees the incorporation of body

practices “as a way of taking care of ourselves,” rather than as a strict “samurai thing” where women feel they have to push themselves “to the edge” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). Practices such as stretching periods, chi gong, tai chi, or yoga are often offered at *sesshins*, or intense meditation retreats. Munnich, a former dancer, often offers Alexander Technique lessons at her retreats. Alexander Technique, often studied by artists and performers, is a method of utilizing the body in a natural and relaxed way for more efficient use. Munnich sees this practice as “body Zen” (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010).

Along with outside body-oriented rituals, Schireson also incorporates the ancient Buddhist practice of sutra writing, very common in Soto temples in Japan, into her rituals because it “brings the meaning into the body by having the actual physical experience of reading, writing, and chanting the sutra together” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). Though monks in Japan are not believed to practice other forms of bodywork like yoga or massage, traditional sutra writing is seen in Japanese monasteries, (P. Arai, personal communication, June 22, 2011). Likewise, the nuns in Japan do informally practice some massage and stretching, but “they are not out teaching lay people how to do these things; they do them among themselves” (P. Arai, personal communication, June 22, 2011).

While some see the adoption of these new body-centered practices as being the result of women’s more intimate connection with their own bodies than men have, since they are so often defined by their biological processes, others see it as coming from a place of disconnection (C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011).

Schireson posits that women in Zen “need to feel safe in their [bodies] in different ways

than men” that will allow them to “become more intimate and expressive as themselves within Zen” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). The idea of needing to feel safe may stem from centuries of threat of bodily harm that has seeped into the female psyche pointing to deeper psychological and social issues besides women simply wanting to feel less stressed.

It seems that Soto women may be consciously trying to combat something inherent in the tradition handed down to them. One of these issues may be that in Buddhism, the female gender is the only gender, which may sound positive for women, but which in actuality makes the male form ungendered and therefore ideal, while the female form “is considered problematic and...subject to interrogation” (Das Gupta, 2009, p. 231). Therefore, femaleness as the only gender, is seen as “a lack of maleness” (Tisdale, 2006, p. 8). This comes as a result of what Buddhist feminist researcher Alan Sponberg (1992) claims “to be simply a Buddhist appropriation of prevailing social views regarding gender” (p. 18).

The result is that within Buddhism, men are depicted as “somehow less gendered than women...[and] by virtue of their male anatomy closer to an ideal of androgyny” (Das Gupta, 2009, p. 231). This is evident in the dogma surrounding the attainment of Buddhahood, where the ideal sex is masculine. Gross (2009) finds that because Buddhism places a premium on the mind as “the ‘leader’ of human activities,” rather than on the body, women are at a disadvantage because “conventional gender roles by and large define women only in terms of the potential of their bodies” (p. 7). The male form then, as the “neutral...ideal...[and] natural state” becomes the form that is required for attaining Buddhahood, the “proto-Buddha-to be” and the female form as different from

this state, is the problem (Tisdale, 2006, p. 8; Das Gupta, 2009, p. 238). Therefore, “femaleness, not gender, is the real problem” in Buddhism (Tisdale, 2006, p. 8). One scholar posits that this treatment of the concept of woman is due to a male projection of their own traits onto women, where women act as a sort of “repository...of negative traits which could be said to characterize men as much as they do women” (Das Gupta, 2009, p. 238). The ensuing conflict in treating women differently than men supposes that gender is “permanent [and] eternal,” and this belief is contradictory to the teachings of Buddhism (Tisdale, 2006, p. 6).

While there are many “examples of male clerics discoursing on the disadvantages of female birth,” “there is no balancing voice that comes from women themselves where maleness is held up to scrutiny or regarded as problematic or ‘other’”(Das Gupta, 2009, p. 231). The notion that women’s gender is a problem for their enlightenment because they are women is also seen in the Japanese Soto *Ketsubon Sutra*. These and other negative beliefs about the female body are a part of Soto history and tradition, just as much as Dogen, *zazen*, and the nun’s fight for equality. These beliefs are now part of the American tradition that American women are having to come to terms with. Added to this cultural import of stigmatization are the U.S.’s own cultural issues with women’s bodily functions which often stem from Judeo-Christian traditions. As a result, American Soto Zen women are faced with negative body images from all sides and feel the need to combat and expel the negative images that they have been fed by incorporating ritual activities that honor and deem sacred women’s sensory experiences (Northup, 1997, p. 31).

### **Rites for children.**

American Soto women are incorporating rites having to do with children into their practice to evoke the feminine. Many of the women in this study, like the nuns in Japan, evoke the role of mother. According to Gross (1993), there is some “ambiguity regarding motherhood” in Buddhism, though Buddhists tend not to “idealize the self-sacrificing, over-burdened mother as The Woman Who Is Fulfilling Her True Potential, a Paragon of Female Virtue, to be emulated by all women” (p. 232). In Buddhism, mothers are revered when they “are embodiments of the feminine principle of wisdom,” such as with *Prajnaparamita*, the Mother of the Buddhas and the perfection of wisdom (p. 234). The major burden of motherhood in Buddhism is that “motherhood inevitable brings attachment,” an emotion which keeps people in *samsara*, or the cycle of birth and rebirth (p. 233). Paradoxically, although attachment is seen as a negative characteristic, the “care and concern involved in mothering” is highly regarded (p. 233). Despite many feminist arguments against associating women with bodily functions such as mothering, in Sered’s (1994) study of religions where women are dominant, she found that motherhood is a “pivotal theme” (p. 73).

Within Soto Zen, where large numbers of women are participating and altering the tradition, motherhood is also a recurring theme. Jiko Linda Cutts, an American Soto teacher finds connections between motherhood and teaching. She finds the teacher-student relationship and the process of *Dharma* transmission similar to the bonding that occurs between a mother and her child (Ikeda-Nash, 2000, p. 299). As a mother cannot be a mother without a child, so a teacher needs a student; they “need each other to complete the practice” (p. 300). Furthermore, Schireson believes that women “have a



biological component to appreciating and wanting to take care of children” and therefore American Soto women engage in practices that include children (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011).

As Meg Levie pointed out, Soto sometimes comes across as a purely monastic tradition because of the lack of ceremonies and rituals for children and overall acknowledgement of children in the tradition (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011). In contrast, women in this study discussed incorporating children’s rituals and ceremonies into temple life. For instance, at Green Gulch Zen Center, a coming of age program has been developed over the past several years, which allows Levie and others at Green Gulch to “draw on [their] deep familiarity and valuing of ritual and apply it” to coming of age rites that they create (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011).

Incorporating children’s programs and individual children’s rituals can help families incorporate their faith into their children’s lives. Many modern Buddhist women have voiced concerns over “how to teach dharma to their children” (Mrozik, 2008, p. 11). Gross (1993) believes that “formal institutions of the Buddhist world must be involved in this extended childcare” (p. 237).

Levie also discussed a senior teacher at Green Gulch who created a ceremony, not officially as part of the Zen center, but on the grounds, to commemorate her daughter’s menarche (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011). Similarly, though not officially ritualized, Bennage shares the Japanese custom of cooking congratulatory red beans and rice with families who have daughters that have just started their first period (P. Bennage, personal communication, March 7, 2011). Likewise, Nakao has participated

in helping a family design a rite of passage ritual for their 13 year old son (W. Nakao, personal communication, March 28, 2011).

Many of the women discussed creating baby blessing ceremonies. Schireson consulted with her teacher before doing one of her own the first time to “see what there is and adapt from there” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). She learned that her teacher had “some words and some wisdom water and a little statement that he made” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). To this, Schireson added giving the baby a Buddhist name and writing this name in calligraphy on a bib (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). For Schireson, an important aspect of developing such a ceremony lies in making it work in a way that makes sense in the West, rather than wondering what Dogen would have done and trying to duplicate that (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). Though Schireson believes that nuns are often involved in baby naming in Japan, she wanted the ceremony to be “something that made sense to people here” (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). Similarly, Bennage has participated in baby blessings that address the needs of both the mother and the child (P. Bennage, personal communication, March 7, 2011).

There are also other ceremonies that the women participate in that speak to a feminine approach to dealing with children. One such ritual is the ceremony for lost children where the women of the *sangha* beseech Jizo *Bodhisattva* to care for the grieving mother’s deceased child “as though it were [their] own” so that they might carry some of the mother’s burden and share in her grief (P. Bennage, personal communication, March 7, 2011). The intent here is to free the mother from her suffering, and Bennage

has found in her practice that this ritual is “effective and soothing” (P. Bennage, personal communication, March 7, 2011).

Women in the American Soto Zen community also participate in rituals that assist women in healing after an abortion, though this ritual is open to both men and women. Nakao explains that during the ritual, personal histories are shared, a child-size cardboard *Jizo Bodhisattva* doll is dressed for each abortion, the doll is named, and sitting in a circle, the participants “dedicate merits to the child” (W. Nakao, personal communication, March 28, 2011). The *Jizo* is then put in the garden for all to see. The intent behind this ritual is to honor the child and for the men and women involved to “speak about their abortions in the company of those who shared this experience themselves” (W. Nakao, personal communication, March 28, 2011). Nakao explained that in addition to this abortion ritual, she has also participated in other family healing rituals such as those for divorce.

Though not directly dealing with children, the Buddha’s birthday ceremony, a ritual conducted at most Zen temples, comes up for Schireson as a tender ceremony evoking the feel of a mother and child role. Almost treated as a Spring rite, the ritual has a very “alive quality to it” as tea is poured over the baby Buddha and flowers and sweet tea are enjoyed (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011).

The women in this study represent a wide range of interpretations of traditional Soto practices available to American Soto practitioners. While some choose to adhere to a more traditionally monastic routine with a shaved head and devotion to their *sanghas*, others take on the more American roles of being a working mother with short hair. Many of the rituals described place an emphasis on feminine aspects either through female

deities, horizontal and community oriented sharing, bodywork, and rites for children. They allow women an outlet to express themselves as women in a tradition that does not often acknowledge the female gender or femininity in a positive light. The fact that these women can choose their ritual practices like this is evidence that American women are changing what it means to be a female ordained Soto priest by creating their own definitions of their roles. This more self reflective ritual process is evidence of a less strict imposition of tradition and a more fluid approach to Soto ritual practice.

Primary research backed up the secondary research which says that many American Soto women are practicing Zen with their gender in mind and that being a woman affects how they practice and teach Zen. The primary research goes a step further to reveal that some Soto women do not feel that Zen addresses a woman's practice needs. As a result, Soto women have been creative in the development of their ritual practices and have ended up incorporating many of the themes that Northup discussed in her work including community oriented practice, the experience of being a woman, domestic duties, and gender inclusive language. They have gone about these things in different ways.

Many of the women have altered traditional monastic rituals such as head shaving and celibacy to either fit into American life better or to fulfill their personal desires to have partners and/or children. Their personal choices to follow traditional monastic rituals or not, may stem somewhat from their understanding of themselves as monastic or not, though many of the women who do not follow these rituals still consider themselves monastic, at least at times. As a result, their way of living is more in line with that of the Japanese male priests than that of the Japanese nuns.

Furthermore, within traditional monastic practices, women have made the language more gender neutral and inserted themselves through the women's ancestor chant, a practice that, according to Northup, is evident in other women's ritual traditions, though not something that the nuns in Japan had to deal with because the gendered language appears in English and not Japanese. It is also in keeping with women's tendency to create their own rituals to suit their needs. The power of language is an important aspect of American women's inclusion in the tradition and an empowering component of their practice. Primary research revealed that the invocation of the feminine in a variety of ways allows women to embrace their gender with the full understanding that the end goal of Zen is to move beyond gender. But, as Gross pointed out, one must first study it in order to forget it. The women in this study do more than study it; many embrace it and celebrate it through community oriented practice and the inclusion of goddesses like Kuan Yin and Tara.

It may be argued that within the Japanese nuns' practices where they are ultra traditional and at the same time a culturally acceptable feminine woman, the nuns are also looking to feel included in the tradition. This may be a reason why they follow Dogen so closely. Perhaps the Japanese nuns want to feel good about who they are as women, which is why they make their own rules and practice as they see fit. Perhaps they want to share their experiences with other women, which is why they practice together, without men. There may be underlying similarities in what the American and Japanese women want. However, the quest for legitimacy remains an important point at which the two groups diverge. The fact that American women are not looking for

legitimacy with their rituals allows them more outlets to ritually explore these different avenues.

In addition, the similarity between both the Japanese and the American women's work with children arises. Indeed, both groups work with children. Without defining women simply as mothers, but at the same time recognizing that women may have more of an affinity toward working with children than many men do, the similarity in these two groups must be addressed. However, the motivations behind the groups are what set them apart. While American Soto women choose to work with children because they enjoy it, Japanese Soto nuns have, at least to some degree, taken up the practice because it fills a niche that the monks simply cannot fill because they are men and not seen as mother figures.

Overall, the primary research revealed that women in American Soto Zen practice rituals that help them feel included in the tradition, allow them to feel good about who they are as women and incorporate who they are into their rituals, and share their experiences with other women. The question now remains, are the alterations that women are making only affecting women or are men in the tradition also evincing similar changes.

## **CHAPTER VIII: AMERICAN SOTO MEN**

### **Traditional Monastic Practices**

While American Soto women are practicing rituals on their own terms, many American Soto men are also altering rituals to fit their needs, and though many of the ritual actions stem from different intentions, there is some overlap in men and women's ritual practices. The Soto men interviewed for this study all aspire to practice a Zen that

is beyond gender; however, they recognize that they “exist and practice in this relative world where gender is real” (T. O’Toole, personal communication, May 10, 2011). For Ted O’Toole, senior priest in training at the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center, dealing with the issue of gender in Zen means being “comfortable with it, but also pay[ing] attention to all the gender related problems that pop up in the world,” while “coming to terms with a history of discrimination in institutional Buddhism, and making sure that it does not continue” (T. O’Toole, personal communication, May 10, 2011).

Ritual celibacy is one area where American Soto men and women overlap in their practices. Steve Stucky, abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, says he practiced celibacy for several years, but felt that his Zen practice would be “expressed more completely by being in a relationship” (S.Stucky, personal communication, May 13, 2011). He is now married with several children, and like some of the women in this study, noted the challenge of taking on a family whilst being a monastic, adding that “it doesn’t work for everyone” (S. Stucky, personal communication, May 13, 2011). Stucky’s “dharma practice is primary,” and as a result, he accepts that his may feel they do not get as much of his attention as they might want (S. Stucky, personal communication, May 13, 2011). He strives to find “some dynamic balance to be worked with and to be discovered, lost, and found again” (S. Stucky, personal communication, May 13, 2011).

Ted O’Toole was ordained when his son was in college, so he had more time to more fully commit to his priesthood, as he thought “it would have been impossible to keep up with the demands of being a priest when [his son] was small” (T. O’Toole,

personal communication, May 10, 2011). He admits that it is difficult to be the spouse of a Zen priest, just as it is difficult to be a priest, requiring “great attention to keeping the proper balance between home and Zen center” (T. O’Toole, personal communication, May 10, 2011).

Similarly, the Soto men interviewed for this study discussed personal choices to shave or not shave their heads. For Stucky, who owned a landscape business for many years, short hair worked better. However, since taking on the role of abbot at San Francisco Zen Center—teaching dharma and practicing full time—he feels he should keep it shaved all the time (S. Stucky, personal communication, May 13, 2011). On the other hand, O’Toole chose not to continue shaving his head after his ordination ceremony, in part because his wife prefers it this way. He also feels that it is important that there are Zen teachers “living out in the world,” as “rather ordinary [people] walking down the street” (T. O’Toole, personal communication, May 10, 2011). He feels that his life and practice help to show members of his *sangha* how to fully realize the “teachings in the midst of very busy lives” (T. O’Toole, personal communication, May 10, 2011). Similarly, Peter Schneider, founder of Beginner’s Mind Zen Center in California, does not shave his head, but points out that he is not in a monastic situation that would require him to (P. Schneider, personal communication, May 10, 2011).

### **Women’s Rituals That Men Practice**

Additionally, all the men interviewed participate in some form of chanting female ancestors. At San Francisco Zen Center, Stucky says they chant the women’s ancestors, “recognizing it’s not exactly the same as lineage, but...also that there have always been women from the founding of Buddhism” (S. Stucky, personal communication, May 13,



2011). O'Toole chants the names of women during the formal Saturday service and thinks "it's great...to acknowledge the women practitioners who have not been sufficiently recognized throughout our history" (T. O'Toole, personal communication, May 10, 2011). He says that he finds a "sweetness and warmth" in the chant (T. O'Toole, personal communication, May 10, 2011). Schneider does not do the women's chant because he doesn't do the male chant. Though, if he did one, he says, he would do both (P. Schneider, personal communication, May 10, 2011). According to O'Hara, who watched his *sangha* as they recited the women's lineage one day, "The men were deeply affected by the women's response, seeing in them a reflection of their own feelings of disempowerment" (O'Hara, 2008, p. 220). Similarly, Wendy Nakao remembers seeing men cry when they first heard the women's chant (W. Nakao, personal communication, March 28, 2011).

Some of the men also discussed having female *bodhisattvas* on the altars at their temples. There are many altars at San Francisco Zen Center, some of which, according to Stucky, have female deities. There is an Alvalikitaeshvara, a female form also known as Kuan Yin, on an altar, and on another, a Manjushri *Bodhisattva*, the *bodhisattva* emphasizing wisdom or *Prajna*. There is a Prajnaparamita at the Berkeley Zen Center that, according to Stucky, is clearly a feminine figure, and at Green Gulch, as Levie noted, there is a Tara (S. Stucky, personal communication, May 13, 2011). Stucky feels that people are not all masculine or all feminine, so he finds it helpful to have a feminine image to evoke "some more openhearted feeling" and a greater capacity for listening within himself (S. Stucky, personal communication, May 13, 2011).

Another similarity these men share with American women is that they participate in rituals that have to do with children. Stucky has created a baby blessing ceremony and O'Toole says that at his temple, there are Family Sundays once a week where parents and kids come together to practice Zen. Schneider does not have many children coming to his smaller temple, but says that they enjoy a *bodhi* tree party around the Christmas season, at which *sangha* members bring their children to decorate a tree (P. Schneider, personal communication, May 10, 2011).

While many of these Soto men also take part in a more horizontal form of leadership or include elements from Native American traditions, they do not, necessarily work in councils the way many of the women in this study do. Schneider says he practices a “kind of feminine Zen,” recognizing his horizontal approach to teaching (P. Schneider, personal communication, May 10, 2011). He has “nothing against authority,” but tries to “under-stress it” (P. Schneider, personal communication, May 10, 2011). O'Toole practiced Native American rituals before seriously recommitting to Buddhist practice, though he tries to apply a more fluid approach to his teaching, with a willingness to abandon those things that may have prevented him from fully “meeting the person in front of him” (O'Toole, personal communication, May 10, 2011). Stucky incorporates into his practice Native American ritual purification techniques that use cedar or sage (S. Stucky, personal communication, May 10, 2011).

### **Women's Rituals That Men Do Not Practice**

There are also some differences between the Soto practices of American women and men. For example, while the men did have some female deities on their altars, they did not relate to the Prajnaparamita, the mother of all buddhas, as being a particularly

feminine form. Schneider says he does not make much of a distinction about its gender, but notes that his wife may see things differently (P. Schneider, personal communication, May 10, 2011). The men also tend not to take part in bodywork rituals and practices. This may be perhaps because men do not have to contend with the same stigmatization of their bodies as do women. As a result, men may have fewer internalized struggles with their body images and feel less of a need to explore their bodies and feel safe in them.

Clearly, some of the rituals that Soto women are practicing overlap with those of their female Japanese counterparts, and some overlap with those of their male U.S. counterparts. This overlap indicates that American women's ritualizing is generated not simply because they are female or Soto practitioners, but also because of changes that occur in religions when they become distinctively American.

## **CHAPTER IX: AMERICANIZATION**

Examination of the ritual lives of female American Soto priests, in light of the ritual activities of their counterparts', whether the nuns in Japan or the men in the U.S., indicates that these practices have been influenced by a femininization of Soto Zen, but also by the American syncretization of religion.

### **Syncretism**

Religions are fluid entities that are created and evolve "as the faith is passed to each new generation" (Melton, 2004, p. 11). Historically, transformations in religion have occurred when different cultures and belief systems come across one another, either because of migration or when a conquering force imposes its ideas on an indigenous population (Kurtz, 2007, p. 48). Regardless of who the more powerful party may be, the interaction of the two religions inevitably changes both religions (p. 173). Because the

faith of a given population was originally “constructed along relatively homogeneous lines by a group of like minded people,” the more people who interact with that religion, the more the religion will change (p.175).

As people interact with others and learn of differing world views, their own world views are reevaluated. During this reevaluation process, ideas from the new religion may be incorporated, or the original traditions may be reformulated, in an effort to strengthen them “in direct opposition to new challenges” (p. 175). Changes that result from cultural interactions and “subtle social and psychological pressures” lead people either to a syncretic process of “inter-religious integration” with the other belief systems, or a direct opposition to it as fundamentalism (Partridge, 2004, p. 14). Historically, syncretization occurs when elements from other traditions are “grafted on to localized and traditional religions,” though in the modern world, there is more of a trend toward a “mix’n’matchy” approach, especially as the “‘grand narratives’ embedded in traditional religious systems,” once so prominent in American’s lives are “collapsing” (Hunt, 2002, p. 54).

This syncretic change also affects the culture’s rituals as the establishing links “between a people and their worldview” (Kurtz, 2007, p. 31). For example, indigenous Chinese festivals and gods either became a part of the “overall Buddhist practice” when Buddhism entered East Asia, and the Chinese deities became part of Buddhist ceremonies and festivals (p. 31). Furthermore, the characteristics of any given society will affect the dogma of the evolving religion. According to Berkay (1998), “religion in various societies exists in harmony with the specific characteristics of that society...therefore...no religious dogma remains as pure as it was originally” because the influences of the various social modalities where a religion has traveled have impacted the religion (p. 1).

Though all the major religions “were created over the centuries, through processes of intercultural conflict, amalgamation, and creative synthesis,” this process is occurring more frequently and at a faster pace now than ever before (Kurtz, 2007, p. 216). With the arrival of radio, then television, and most importantly the internet, cultures are not as secluded as they once were, so dissemination of a given religious culture happens “widely and rapidly” (Partridge, 2004, p. 15). People in the twenty-first century are therefore regularly exposed, now more than ever, to other religions and as a result, religious adaptation is accelerated (p. 15).

Perhaps nowhere is this more true than in the West, specifically America, which has a history of diverse religious groups establishing communities, a trend that has continued up to the present day (Kurtz, 2007, p. 217). According to Melton (2004), the West now lives “in a condition of extreme religious pluralism” (p. 10). This “unprecedented growth” is due to multicultural immigration, which has led to a melting pot of multi-religious communities (Partridge, 2004, p. 14). In the U.S., the 1960s brought “waves of new immigrants from various parts of the world,” including large numbers of Asian immigrants that changed the religious landscape in the West by influencing “non-Christian believers in the United States” (Kurtz, 2007, p. 217).

America has also spawned an unprecedented number of new religions. In the U.S., “reform movements, revivals, and novel developments,” with new emphases and ideas, as well as fundamentalist backlashes and the dying out of old forms have continually created new religions and offshoots of older ones (Partridge, 2004, p. 20). According to Melton (2004), “most new religions are presenting old religions in a new context and to a new audience” (p. 10). In the last fifty years, a remarkable surge in the number of these

new religions, sects, or alternative spiritualities has developed. They generally arise from a mixing of traditions, often in an attempt to stay relevant to “their time and place and [the] people they serve” (p. 11). This results in movements such as the Nation of Islam, which incorporates “new teachings into the [Islamic] tradition” and a rise in Celtic spirituality, which follows ancient teachings that have been “abandoned or forgotten” (p.11). At the same time, it generates attempts to halt change and “perpetuate an older way of life,” as seen in various forms of fundamentalism (p. 11).

### **Examples in Zen**

Syncretization has occurred with all religions and sects, including Buddhism, which has flourished like only a few other traditions in extremely diverse cultures, adapting and yet “retaining considerable continuity over the centuries” (Kurtz, 2007, p. 65). Buddhism itself is a product of social change within the religious culture of the sixth century BCE India, where “diverse cultures were encountering one another” (p. 65). Siddhartha Gautama’s world view was formulated, in part, as “a response to [that] multicultural contact” (p. 65). As Buddhism traveled across countries and time periods, it “absorbed and blended with each culture it encountered” (Tisdale, 2006, p. 5). When Buddhism diffused throughout Asia, various branches emerged where different parts of the teachings were emphasized over others, often “according to their affinities with indigenous cultures” (Kurtz, 2007, p. 66). This syncretization may explain why Buddhism never really flourished in the culture where it was founded. Instead, over several centuries Buddhism made its way into China, where it did flourish and as a result, “the world view and ethos of Buddhism became profoundly intertwined with that of Asian cultures generally and consequently grew extraordinarily diverse” (p. 81).

Buddhism entered China during the first century and “encountered Taoism,” the Chinese native religion, “with its deep appreciation of nature and the arts” (Loori, TT, p. xii). According to Addiss and Loori (2007), “Taoism’s accent on simplicity intermingled with the complex metaphysics of Indian Buddhism, tempering its philosophical tendencies, [resulting in] a very direct and pragmatic kind of Buddhism” (p. xiv). Furthermore, the “Buddhist emphasis on respect for all life, its general tolerance for all religious perspectives, and its ability to incorporate other traditions in its teaching” allowed for the religion to take hold wherever it was introduced (Kurtz, 2007, p. 72). As Buddhist texts were translated into Chinese, the “idioms of Taoism” were used to translate and express Buddhist concepts and practices, resulting in a “closely intertwined” amalgamation that is often difficult to separate (p. 72).

Ch’an, (Chinese Zen), as one sub-sect of the larger overarching Mahayana branch of Buddhism, is one of the movements that came out of Buddhist China. Zen, as a “living tradition...adapts itself everywhere” (Dharma, 1992, p. 114). Historians can actually trace the “continual transformation” of Zen “over its many centuries of time and in its movement from one culture to another” (Wright, 2008, p. 15). Schireson (2009) believes that this adaptation has “benefitted its practitioners across time and culture[s]” because regardless of the various transformations, it has always maintained its “essential message—that human beings can transform their consciousness and lessen suffering” (p. 234).

Entering a religious culture of indigenous Shinto, as well as Confucianism and Taoism exported from China earlier around the fifth century CE, Buddhism in sixth-century Japan also found itself interacting with other traditions (Kurtz, 2007, p. 78). An

example of the result of the syncretic development of early Buddhism in Japan, Shinto *kami*, or spirits and personified deities, were seen as “protectors of Buddhism, and shrines were built within the precincts of the Buddhist temples” (p. 78). In fact, Buddhist monks in the medieval period “tried to convince people that the Shinto *kami* were actually Buddhist deities” (Fisher, 2008, p. 223).

Eventually, Ch’an first traveled to Japan, by way of the Rinzai Zen master Eisei, during the Kamakura period in the twelfth century. Later, in the early thirteenth century, Zen master Dogen brought the Soto sect over from China. According to Foulk (2008), the transmission of Ch’an in China to Zen in Japan initially took a monastic road because the tradition that came over was “a replication...of the most conservative, state-sanctioned monastic institutions of...China” (p. 24). Likewise, Dogen’s Soto was extremely monastically oriented, as he believed that one could only find enlightenment with monastic vows. Over time, as his heirs took over leadership of the sect, the practice became more inclusive of the laity.

As Zen migrated from Japan to the U.S., the emphasis on monasticism and even on Zen as a religion was diminished in favor of focusing instead on the “spirit of Zen” and its philosophies, which may have been the reason that Zen eventually became the form of Buddhism most practiced by Americans (Tworkov, 1994, p. 19). However, during the early years of Zen’s migration to the U.S.—from the 1930s to the 1950s—its main practitioners were limited to the “recognizable intelligensia,” the Transcendentalists, and the “avant-garde underground” (p. 7). In the fifties, the Beat generation became interested in aspects of Zen philosophy—for example, emptiness, which “became a critical reference for a new social iconography”—but their interests did not extend to practices



like *zazen* (p. 7). This approach was made popular with books by D.T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, and other Beat poets and was, for the most part, “pervasively male” (p. 3). According to Tworkov (1994), this expression of Zen “enshrined the ethos of rugged cowboy individualism as much as Hollywood westerns,” and in a sense, was in keeping with the Japanese association of “Zen with the samurai tradition” (p. 95, 13). The emphasis on Buddhist philosophy must also be understood in light of the predominant lenses of philosophy and psychology typical of American culture (p. 95). Great thinkers like Descartes, Freud, Jung, and Einstein are the frames through which Americans relate.

On the other hand, though both men and women read about Zen, women during this time tended to focus on practice over philosophy, so women were predominantly the ones seen sitting *zazen* and participating in meditation retreats (p. 13). Perhaps the idea of sitting on a cushion doing nothing was not considered a masculine thing to do (p. 13). Women were also interested in the Zen arts of calligraphy, ceramics, tea ceremony, and flower arranging, which at the time were “considered a woman’s domain” both in the U.S. and in Japan by that time (p. 13).

Over time, as Zen was practiced by a larger American population, “the authority of the Japanese tradition began losing ground to the American insistence on questioning the tradition” (p. 4). As Boucher (1993) notes, “We are Americans, with a heritage of egalitarianism and resistance to authority...[though] none of this is inconsistent with the essential teachings of Buddhism” (p. 22). Still, Dr. Hisamatsu, a founder of the Cambridge Buddhist Association, acknowledged in 1984 that an understanding of Zen’s history makes one aware that it “adapts itself to various circumstances” and added that it must change from what it was centuries ago in Japan if it is to thrive in America (Stuart,

1992, p. 12, 13). The current thinking of most Zen scholars on American syncretization of Zen is that “these adaptations, versus a rigid imitation of...Asian teachers, are an important component of developing Zen practice” (Schireson, 2009, p. 89). Furthermore, Schireson (2009) believes that studying women’s adaptations, in particular, may help complete “the transplantation of Zen to the West” (p. 89).

### **Western Fascination with the East**

In reviewing the ritual practices of American Soto women through the American adaptation process, several classic elements of American syncretization are evident, including a Western fascination with the East and a move toward more ancient or primordial religions, as well as the incorporation of the women’s spirituality movement and the effects of religion in a capitalist society. The U.S. has often gone through periods of intense fascination with the East, from the Victorian era through the twenty-first century with the Beatles’ fascination with India, though it was not until after World War II that Asian religions like Zen began attracting large numbers of non-Asian followers. Still, Eastern mysticism seems to captivate American audiences and it is proposed that this fascination is not because these traditions are alien to Americans, but because they strike a chord and resonate. According to Hunt (2002), many values in Hindu and Buddhist thought “dovetail not only with contemporary alternative thinking [in the U.S.], but some of the developing core values and beliefs of the west” (p. 53). The Eastern paradigm is, according to sociologist, Colin Campbell, “more compatible with some aspects of current western societies with their increasing interest in environmentalism, popular beliefs related to reincarnation and human potential, as well as life affirming movements” (as quoted in Hunt, 2002, p. 53). This “process of Easternization,”

Campbell declares, is replacing the “traditional Western cultural paradigm...in the wake of the decline of Christian culture” (Hunt, 2002, p. 53).

This decline combined with a fascination with the east has resulted in an adoption of Asian traditions though they have often been “substantially modified from their Asian roots” (Kurtz, 2007, p. 220). Buddhism, Hinduism, and Chinese religions all have Americanized versions in the states ranging from yoga as an exercise routine to Fung shui as a home decorating plan. The fact that Americans are exploring and practicing Soto Zen at all, while moving away from traditional Western religious practices, is evidence of the continuing appeal of the East.

### **The Move toward the Ancient and Primordial**

American Soto Zen also evinces the American syncretic tendency of embracing more ancient and primordial religions. Some historians refer to this as the “occult,” as this term “describes beliefs that have roots in older intellectual traditions and ancient philosophies” (Chireau, 2004, p. 71). There are many explanations as to the “persistence of such beliefs;” however, one is that these traditions “provide philosophical and theological perspectives that rival conventional views” while “offer[ing] a glimpse of a transcendent, self-sustaining reality” (p. 97). Furthermore, these older religions tend to “emphasize spiritual development and therapy,” which may actually “supplement and support mainstream religious beliefs rather than challenge them” (p. 97).

On the other hand, such spiritual philosophies may be a deliberate move away from traditional Judeo-Christian upbringings. Several of the women interviewed in this study including Schireson and Munnich grew up in the Catholic religion. Nevertheless, Munich, once a Catholic nun, sees how “Catholicism influences the way [she] think[s]

about Buddhism,” (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). Gross (2009) points out that American Zen practitioners and those seeking out alternate Eastern spiritualities in general owe a great deal to their Western upbringing. How else, she argues, would people feel comfortable “abandoning the religions of [their] parents and families without Western concepts of individual choice and freedom of religion” that have been absent in most parts of the world for most of recorded history (Gross, 2009, p. 288). She notes that Western Buddhists often cry out for “individualism” and “human rights,” ideas stemming from the European Enlightenment, not from countries in the East (p. 288).

The incorporation of ancient or primordial religions is evident in the American Soto women’s placement of ancient goddesses like Tara and Kuan Yin on altars for prostration. These female bodhisattva figures come from Tibet and China, both of which have Buddhist traditions dating back earlier than Zen in Japan and have traditions rooted in Earth-centered, primordial practices.

At the same time, the incorporation of such female figures also goes back to even more ancient practices of goddess worship often revisited in neo-pagan religions that have further developed in America. For example, the “rediscovery of many very ancient goddess traditions” has led to the expansion of the many groups known as Wicca, translated as both “wisdom” and “witchcraft,” where practitioners recognize “the power of the goddess” (King, 2004, p. 383). Wiccans commonly have altars with representations of ancient, pre-Christian female deities, create sacred space through forming circles, and create their own rituals to meet their needs. One such ritual involves

sitting in a circle and listing the names of their matrilineal ancestors (Kurtz, 2007, which calls to mind Zen practice.

Another element of the American Soto women's ritual practice that is representative of the American trend toward more ancient and primordial religions is the incorporation of Native American council circles (Weaver-Zercher, 2004). Native American religions find reverence in the earth and incorporate primal shapes such as the circle. The circle, a fundamental shape in ancient religious groups, has been used in a variety of ways and dates back to the Stone Age (Loori, TT).

The representation of the circle has taken many forms, from pagan dances performed in circles to more contemporary halos in religious art. The use of the circle in religious ceremonies is far reaching. Carl Jung saw the circle as an "archetype of wholeness," meaning that it "represents the totality of our being" (Addiss & Loori, 2007, xi). Furthermore, the shape of the circle comes from the natural world—after all first and foremost, "we live on a sphere" that circles around another sphere, the Sun, and the Earth has a sphere circling it, the Moon (p. xi).

The circle is also found in Buddhism in various forms. For example, Buddha's teachings are called the "*Dharma* Wheel, the wheel of reality" (Addiss & Loori, 2007, p. xi). Within Zen, the *Dharma* Wheel is said to turn in both directions (p. xi). Within Zen practice is the quintessential circular form known as the *enso*. Perhaps the most commonly painted subject in Zen, the *enso* is a circle created with one brush stroke. Usually, the beginning of the stroke and the end do not quite touch. According to Addiss and Loori (2007), *enso* paintings "act as visual and poetic koans—apparently paradoxical statements, questions, or demonstrations that point to or suggest the nature of reality" (p.

xii). They are a representation of the moment, “of the totality of the great void,” and a symbol of “enlightenment, power, and the universe itself” (pp. xi, xii).

On the other hand, in true Zen fashion, some Zen masters say that the *enso* has “no fixed meaning” (p. xi). Still, it is agreed that within the *enso* brush stroke, the artist’s character is believed to be fully exposed. It is said that only a person who is “mentally and spiritually complete can draw a true one” (p. xii).

The adaptation of Native American council circles for use in American Soto Zen practice is another result of the Americanization of Soto, incorporating the primordial elements of an Earth-centered religion and the iconic symbolism of the circle. Already a fundamental shape in Zen, the circles constructed in Native American cultures are prevalent in many American spiritual movements.

### **Women’s Spirituality Movement**

The fact that American Soto women are exploring the feminine at all in their practice may stem from the influence of the women’s spirituality movement, a twentieth century movement of the 60s and 70s that itself grew out of “the desire to overcome oppression” and that “linked political action to theological reflection” (Weaver-Zercher, 2004, p. 33). In fact, the “whole women’s movement itself has been described as a spiritual revolution” (King, 2004, p. 381). The growing gender consciousness of the time allowed for a new feminist and theological “critique of Christianity and other male dominated religions” that challenged the “legitimized patriarchal culture and male domination” (Kurtz, 2007, p. 232; Weaver-Zercher, 2004, p. 33). The feminist theologian Mary Daly, for example, in her book *The Church and the Second Sex*, said that traditional Christianity had “made god into ‘an old man with a beard’ and thereby

made women less than fully human” (Weaver, Zercher, 2004, p. 33). Daly eventually concluded that “the Christian religion was hopelessly sexist,” and joined with women who embraced alternate theologies that reaffirmed women’s experiences (p. 34).

In the context of such a movement, “spiritual strengthening is a part of a general concern for empowering women” (Northup, 1997, p. 26). Arising out of second-wave feminism, the women’s or feminist’s spirituality movement “can be understood as the spiritual quest and creativity of contemporary women, pursued in diverse traditional and nontraditional ways” where “feminist insights, writings, and theory often inform women’s rituals, provide their thematic content, and inspire women to work for change” (King, 2004, p. 380; Northup, 1997, p. 26).

As a response to the situation of women’s oppression in the U.S. and within religious realms, American women have chosen not to “reject the entire tradition, but to reshape it, first by documenting the male bias and tracing its sociological roots” (Kurtz, 2007, p. 234). The impact of the women’s spirituality movement also prompts a “more embodied and immanent spirituality...attuned to [women’s] own experience” (King, 2004, p.381). Women’s spirituality strategies involve discovering “an alternative history and tradition that supports the inclusion and personhood of women” (Kurtz, 2007, p. 234). Here, women “draw on the spiritual heritage of women of past ages who, in spite of difficult conditions and numerous social obstacles struggled to follow their own spiritual quest within the particular and cultural contexts of their time” (King, 2004, p. 381). Furthermore, the women’s spirituality movement influences prompt women to adopt “gender inclusive language in religious readings and prayers, and institutional changes that give women access to official religious positions” (p. 383).

Therefore, the women's spirituality movement invents new traditions, but also reshapes traditional institutions. As women have worked within traditional religions, according to King (2004), "new symbols, prayers, songs, and festivals have come into being" and women have often rejected the "spiritual ideas of the past that hold little attraction for contemporary women" (p. 383).

The influence of the women's spirituality movement is evident in the practices of American Soto women who have made deliberate choices that re-position themselves within the tradition. The chanting of the female ancestors as well as an insistence on understanding the tradition's history are all aspects of American women's Soto that may be understood as growing out of the women's spirituality movement. Furthermore, American Soto women's desire to practice together and share their experiences may be the result of the movement. After all, according to Boucher (1993), as a method of "investigation of reality," Buddhism "corresponds to feminist insistence on the rigorous questioning of every assumption" (p. 2).

### **Proselytization**

Another Americanized aspect of religion is proselytization. Proselytization is the "action or practice of converting a person or people to a different opinion...or faith, especially from one religious faith to another" (Harvey, 2004, p. 40). Those who proselytize see themselves as "carriers of a message that may transform individual lives" (p. 40). In the U.S., proselytization occurs via "billboards, websites, automated phone messaging systems, Christian rap music, guitar masses, yoga classes, audio books, theme parks, and cable television stations" (p. 65). The missionary aspect of Christian groups



has lent itself well to proselytization; however, other religious groups are following this model, including Zen Buddhists (p. 40).

Within contemporary Buddhism, Buddha's teachings are often disseminated in "public places such as restaurants as well as in temples" (Kurtz, 2007, p. 146). In addition, Buddhists are conforming to the American consumer culture of proselytization, selling their religion in several ways. There are magazines dedicated to Buddhist teachings in which products for meditation are sold, as well as advertisements for the latest in Buddhist books, and different temples, and retreats available to the public.

Furthermore, conscious adaptation is itself a form of proselytization. If proselytization involves swaying people toward a particular faith, then that faith must be relevant to those people. As Schireson (2009) explains, "Formal Zen practices *need* to be adapted to enhance their relevance to practitioners' specific abilities and cultural circumstances" (p. 89). Most of the women in this study discussed the notion of relevance in their student's lives. Munnich, for instance, is trying to "find out what is essential about the tradition that we shouldn't throw out and what is a cultural accumulation" (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). For instance, she has performed funerals and changed parts "according to what [she] thinks Americans would get" and removed things that she personally didn't connect with (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). Like Munnich, Hondorp is also exploring for herself and her students "how the *dharma* is expressed in this country" and in her town (C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011). She is looking for the "useful message" and admits that it is shifting a little bit from what she initially learned (C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011). Similarly, Schireson

likes to share things that she has found useful with her students (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). So does Nakao, who is not only comfortable looking outside her tradition, but also sees the importance in looking within herself “to see what needs to be brought forward that will serve the needs of people” (W. Nakao, personal communication, March 28, 2011). Bennage feels much the same way, doing what is required not only in the *dharma*, but what may be requested or required by a student (P. Bennage, personal communication, March 7, 2011).

Finding what is needed in a religion as it is transplanted in America is not unique to Soto Zen. Most religions, including the Nation of Islam, several forms of Christianity, and Reform Judaism, that are successfully reimagined forms of older religions or are developed in the U.S., make a point of ensuring their relevance to their members.

Reform Judaism is an excellent example of American religious invention. Here, Jews were “attempting to attract disaffected Jews to a faith that responded to the realities of living in American society” (Harvey, 2004, p. 56). Changes occurred as a result, including a more modern and inviting service, with seating open to families; and though the sect still sought “to maintain the moral emphases of Judaism,” they did so within a more modern world view taking into account the “new rational and liberal thinking emerging in the West” during its development in the early nineteenth century (Partridge, 2004, p. 107; Weaver-Zercher, 2004, p. 24).

In consciously adapting Soto Zen to make it more relevant to Americans, American Soto women are, in effect, proselytizing and participating in a very American aspect of religious life. Unfortunately, proselytization has a negative connotation and many groups would be astounded or even offended were they to be told they are doing it. However,

with the understanding that religion in the U.S. participates in the same capitalist culture as everything else, proselytization may be seen as a selling of religion, whether that be in the form of a meditation pillow and CD, a new book on Zen, an upcoming workshop with a prominent teacher, or the opening of a Zen temple, all found in the latest issue of *Buddhadharma Magazine*.

Religions are sold, but nevertheless people do not want to participate in a religion that does not speak to them. Religions must be relevant, and that is a major concern for American Soto women. They do not simply want to repeat the same teachings and do exactly the same practices that have been imported without serious examination of the practice or teaching. They question the meaning of the rituals in their own lives to develop a better sense of what its meaning may be for their students. This conscious adaptation is, in one sense of the term, a form of proselytization.

## **CHAPTER X: THE CURRENT AND FUTURE STATE OF AMERICAN SOTO ZEN**

### **Current State of American Soto Zen**

The influence of both American women's participation in Soto Zen and American syncretization that is occurring within the sect, as well as changes in hierarchy, opening up to a broader community, the recognition of the feminine, and a more gender-inclusive practice was often referred to by the women in this study as a "softening" of their practice. One study participant described it as follows: "I see the most important changes coming through the influence of psychology and perhaps a softer quality due to the participation of women" (C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011).

The softening starts with a less rigid and more fluid practice. For example, before Hondorp went to study with her teacher, who happened to be a woman, she studied in a Zen center led by a man and found that the institution was “very delineated in terms of the right way to do things” (C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011). Learning from her female teacher, Hondorp found more of an emphasis on “the expression of the individual in everyday life,” which she explained as a “great opening and softening compared to where [she] was at” (C. Hondorp, personal communication, March 31, 2011).

Furthermore, this softer form of Zen is more relational, community oriented, and inclusive both of people and of other traditions. Despite Schireson admitting that some Zen women she knows remain opposed to the inclusion of outside traditions in Soto practice, overall, American Soto Zen appears to be more inclusive of traditions and more community oriented (G. Schireson, personal communication, February 14, 2011). This emphasis is something that Nakao believes stems from the contributions of women, who can be “more relational and emotional than men,” and which “has influenced the culture where they are in teaching or leading positions” (W. Nakao, personal communication, March 28, 2011).

A softer Soto Zen recognizes the feminine as empowerment for both men and women. The figures of Tara and Kuan Yin, for instance, not only speak to American women, but also to American men, reminding them of different qualities than those of the usual male bodhisattvas and buddhas—those qualities often referred to as feminine, thus bringing to light the reality of gender that De La Rosa sums up by recognizing that “Women have the male with [them] and men have the female with them. [They] are the

same, but different” (S. De La Rosa, personal communication, January 26, 2011).

Similarly for Levie, “There’s complete room for masculine and feminine and beyond masculine and feminine” (M. Levie, personal communication, February 7, 2011).

Overall, this makes empowerment available to both men and women equally in a more gender inclusive environment that brings the different genders together to practice. Even at Great Tree Women’s Temple, men are invited to events and meditation *sessins* because Munnich hopes to “bring about a balance in Zen” where everyone will be “able to listen to each other and share” (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). It is Munnich’s intention to allow for an open spiritual conversation between men and women.

In bringing together men and women to practice, some women in this study discussed a yearning to move beyond the gender gap, wanting their students to “come away feeling supported, uplifted, and stronger...beyond the question of being male or female...to address the wholeness” of the person, whatever gender they may be (P. Bennage, personal communication, March 7, 2011). Similarly, Nakao spoke of wanting her students to “come away with a deeper sense of oneness with life itself” (W. Nakao, personal communication, March 28, 2011). Therefore, by embracing the feminine and a more gender inclusive practice, American Soto women hope that it will allow them and their students to experience a Zen that is beyond gender.

Ultimately, this American softening that is occurring is due to a feminine influence on the practice. Women who have practiced with both Japanese nuns and female American teachers speak of this softer practice with women. De La Rosa, for example, found that after practicing with her male teacher and going to the Nisodo convent in

Japan, “something softened in [her] practice,” though she “did not realize it right away” (S. De La Rosa, personal communication, January 26, 2011). De La Rosa described an elder nun in Japan as “an amazing nun” who, though she was “strict, formal, and strong,” was, at the same time, soft, adding that “soft doesn’t mean weak” (S. De La Rosa, personal communication, January 26, 2011).

Japanese Soto monks practice in separate institutions from the nuns. This is the nuns’ preference because according to one abbess of a convent in Japan, “Monks teach differently” (Arai, 1999, p. 62). As a result, monastic men do not practice often with women. Without the opportunity to practice often with women or nuns, the monks in Japan are not influenced by women’s practice. When the tradition came to the U.S, it was brought over by these male monastics who had a masculine style; therefore, trainings that were passed down to American students were designed to teach young men (G. Schireson, 2009). The imported image of a Soto Zen master was that of a man. However, as men and women began practicing together in the U.S., the feminine influence on the tradition was experienced by men as well as women, and as a result, affected American Soto at large. Still, there are exceptions that nevertheless support the idea of softening. For example, O’Hara noted that her male Japanese teacher, Maezumi Roshi, had a way that “was softer and more receptive” than the forms of practice she had come across, embodying traits often associated with women, such as “a willingness for dialogue and a sensitivity to one’s feelings” (O’Hara, 2008, p. 198).

Unlike most male priests in Japan, ordained men in the U.S. are participating in a softer Soto Zen because they are practicing with women regularly. Though some practice centers may still have a “macho feeling” and a masculine style, many Zen communities

are softening up their practices due to a feminine influence (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). Even when men and women don't practice together often, like at Great Tree, a softer practice may emerge for the men. Munnich has seen a shift in the men at Zen Center of Asheville, where she had served as head teacher prior to founding Great Tree Temple. At first the men were upset when Munnich said she was leaving, but now "they've really come around and are starting to say, how [can they] help? [They] see the value of what [she is] doing" (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010). Munnich sees a "shift" in her male students and believes a great deal of it resulted from the opening of Great Tree, as if the men see that women's exploration of the tradition helps them on their own paths (T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010).

However, this more fluid version of Soto Zen found in the U.S. is also the result of Americanization, not simply feminine influence. If it were simply a feminine influence, than the nuns in Japan would be practicing in this manner, and though they embody certain elements characteristic of the softening discussed here, they do not embody all of the same elements. For instance, they still have a more strict and vertical hierarchical practice than do many Soto centers in the States. They are also less willing to alter or add to the tradition, a trait that is commonly seen in the States. Both of these characteristics are elements of the American softening defined here.

The less formal and more flexible practice of American Zen is also the result of Americanization because it is not just women in the U.S. who are participating in this, but men as well. For instance, men use more horizontal forms of hierarchy, incorporate elements from other traditions, and perform rituals that have to do with children, to name

a few. Because the monks in Japan do not perform activities that have anything to do with children, for example, leaving those activities to the nuns, clearly the softening is affecting American men and not Japanese men as the result of Americanization of the practice.

### **Future of Soto Zen in America**

With so many changes occurring as a result of Soto coming to the U.S., the future of the tradition here is uncertain; it is unclear what the tradition will end up looking like when it has been here as long as it has been in Japan. Nevertheless, it does appear that the majority of adaptations are working. No rituals or practices appear to be haphazardly thrown together. The women interviewed for this study all put great time and thought into the adaptations they are making. If something appears not to be working, it is modified or replaced. This goes hand in hand with the Zen insistence on experiencing something for one's self and not simply taking another's word for it. If something feels like it is not working, it will come up and be addressed.

With the changes that the tradition is undergoing in the U.S., another reasonable question to ask is: Will the emerging tradition flourish? This study reveals that the emerging U.S. Soto sect of Zen will likely flourish in the U.S., just as many other imported religious sects that have changed with their time and place have flourished. For instance, Reform Judaism, Nation of Islam, and Yoga as a part of the Hindu tradition are all religions or spiritualities that have flourished in the U.S. because practitioners have altered the original tradition to better speak to an American audience, just as people in Soto are doing.



With so much change occurring, another valid question is whether or not the tradition is still Soto. This study indicates that the tradition, at least for the time being, is still Soto. First, men and women practice together in the U.S., which is a custom that Dogen himself promoted, but after his death and in the following generations was revised to separate the genders. Also, the fundamental practice of Soto, *zazen*, is still the focal point of American practitioners. The emphasis on this remains, as does the emphasis on lineage. Though new lineage or ancestors may have been added to the tradition and gendered words neutralized, the significance of a person's lineage remains important, as does the idea of Zen lineage in general.

If this religious sect is still going to be considered Soto, the next reasonable question would be one of recognition by the Japanese headquarters. So far, Japanese headquarters has recognized Americanized versions of Soto practice once priests have fulfilled their ordination obligations and are recognized in the tradition. American Soto Zen practitioners have, thus far, been given the latitude to practice as they see fit. Japanese headquarters does not appear interested in micromanaging their American priests, and so they may not know of some of the practices that occur, or perhaps they do and simply do not mind. As long as the emphasis on lineage and *zazen* remain, it is most probable that Japanese headquarters will continue to recognize American Soto Zen.

However, the question of whether or not the Japanese nuns will accept it may be quite different. After all, the nuns are women who choose to adhere to strict traditions beyond what their sect officially requires, and find it somewhat reprehensible that the Japanese monks have chosen to continue practicing in such a non-traditional manner. Still, many well respected American Soto women, including several in this study, have

traveled to Japan to practice with the nuns at the main *nisodo* or convent with Abbess Aoyama Roshi, the highest ranking female monastic in the sect. The abbess appears to support American women's practice, and is willing to instruct the Americans in the traditional ways of Soto. Aoyama Roshi has even traveled to the states to participate in rituals with American women. While the abbess may not agree with non-traditional practices for herself and her fellow Japanese nuns or for Japanese monastic men, she appears to have no issue with American women's practice, perhaps understanding that change to Soto in America is inevitable.

Both the primary and secondary sources for this study indicate that American Soto Zen is still Soto Zen for a number of reasons. First, there are elements that are perhaps more in keeping with traditional Soto than are some Japanese practices. The fact that men and women practice together is something that Dogen wanted, and this is not followed in Japan. Also, *zazen* is at the heart of the practice for women I spoke with. This fundamental has not changed. It will also remain Soto because of the emphasis on Soto lineage, training, and ordination—all of which, according to the primary research, are important to American Soto women and men and not something that they are straying from.

American Soto is undergoing syncretism the way it did from India to China and China to Japan. Continual small cultural changes are occurring and as a result, American Soto will, one day, be just as American as Japanese Soto is Japanese. Part of how American Soto is shaping up, which distinguishes it from its counterpart in Japan, is that it is a softer practice all around. Not just a softer practice by the women, but one that is affecting all of Soto, men and women. This softer practice is more fluid and open to

change, focuses on a more community oriented and horizontal approach to teaching, is gender inclusive in that men and women practice together, and also empowers both sexes by celebrating the female.

## **Chapter XI: Conclusion**

*I aspired to religious life from the time I was five years old. I was with my teacher for 15 or 16 years. I was at Tassajara for three practice periods and a summer. I was in Japan for two and a half years in the monastery [and] working on translations [in a Japanese monastery] for six months, and another monastery for two months...I've been in a convent. I've done the work, I really have... I don't have to be beholden to the headquarters in Japan. I don't have to be beholden to the American Zen Teachers Association or the Soto Zen Buddhist Association in the United States. I feel like if I want to change something or do something totally new, it's not like I'm just pulling something out of the air. Like 'oh this sounds like fun, lets do this.' It's not that way. It's a genuine exploration. So now I feel like, let's just see how it unfolds. Let's just explore it. Let's let whatever happens, happen.*

–T. Munnich, personal communication, December 15, 2010

Throughout Buddhism's history in continental Asia, to Soto Zen's history in Japan, and now in America, women have contributed to the tradition, not only by participating, but by coming together to help one another understand their place in the tradition and deal with the struggles of being a Buddhist and Zen woman. They have carved out their

own place in the tradition, whether they are recognized for it or not, by following their instincts and interpreting Zen through the lens of a female eye, despite paradoxically seeking to be beyond gender. The result, particularly in the modern American Buddhist world, is that women must understand themselves as women and embrace their gender if they are to fully move beyond gender. Doing so requires not only self-inquiry, but a re-reading of many Buddhist doctrines that have historically painted women as inferior to men and less capable of achieving enlightenment. But, as Soto Zen scholar Paula Arai pointed out, women have been reconciling these interpretations throughout Buddhist and Zen Buddhist history, each in their own way for their place and time (P. Aria, personal communication, June 22, 2011).

Nevertheless, as Zen made its way to America and encountered the currents of the second-wave women's movement, as well as the American cultural affinity for questioning tradition, the concept of gender equality and fairness in Zen was at the forefront. Women's inclusion and participation in the American branch of the tradition, since Zen's arrival in the early days of the twentieth century, have produced significant alterations to the tradition originally brought over by male monks almost 100 years ago. Never before in Zen's history have women been so prominently at the forefront of the emerging religion in a new culture.

American Soto Zen women understand that Zen is beyond gender. They ultimately strive for that experiential understanding however, in so doing, many do not ignore their gender, for as Buddhist scholar and feminist Rita Gross (2009) pointed out, ignoring gender will "only make things worse" (p. 262). After all, people cannot help but be gendered in their bodies, and proceed on their paths to enlightenment through a gendered

experience. Accordingly, most American Soto women embrace their gender, acknowledging it and celebrating who they are in this life, in this body, recognizing that their gender does influence their practice and teaching styles. In Zen Buddhist women's acknowledgement of their gender, examination of the imposed limitations and expectations on their gender by society and themselves, and understanding of the unconditional reality of Buddha nature, potentially lies their Middle Path toward enlightenment.

In Soto Zen, gender equality was a paramount issue for the nuns in Nagoya, Japan, who in the twentieth century fought to restore their monastic rights within the sect, due in part to the influence from the first wave of the American women's movement. The nuns chose specific tactics in their fight for monastic legitimacy that included being beyond reproach in all things traditionally monastic and, at the same time, playing into the Japanese idea of femininity. The combination of these tactics was effective and Soto women's monastic rights were reinstated.

As a result of the nun's crusade, when Soto came to the U.S., it was in a much more fair and balanced place regarding ordained women than it had been in the past and than it still is in many other forms of Buddhism. Therefore, American Soto women have not had to wage some of the gender battles that their predecessors or peers from other sects have. Consequently, their ritual practices are not as concerned with establishing and maintaining legitimacy, as is the case with the nuns in Japan. For the Soto women in this study, legitimacy is gained through training and practicing with respected teachers, not through monastic tradition. This direction has allowed American Soto women to focus their attention elsewhere, ensuring that the tradition they are cultivating speaks to them

and to American practitioners of both genders. Where historically Japanese nuns primarily sought legitimacy through adherence to tradition and monastic authenticity by reframing monastic practices, American practitioners seem less interested in a strict adherence to tradition and more interested in guiding the practice to be more sensitive toward addressing modern needs. Furthermore, the feminist movement established a different starting point from which practitioners can give purpose to rituals. Nevertheless, American Buddhist and Soto Zen women warn the younger generation not to become complacent, thinking that all gender issues are resolved. They say that there is still work to be done to level the playing field.

The ritual practices of American Soto women reveal that they honor tradition, but are not afraid of exploring practices originating outside of their Soto heritage, or even creating their own ritual variations, in an effort to better understand themselves and actualize Zen, which, according to economics and social history scholar Eric Hobsbawm (1984), is crucial if the tradition is to carry on and not get caught in cultural lag, a state where the culture has moved on past a ritual's relevancy while the rituals remain the same. Cultural lag is clearly not occurring in American Soto, where women are questioning what is essential to the tradition and keeping those elements, while incorporating rituals from other traditions or ones that they have created in an effort to stay relevant and meaningful to themselves and others in American Soto.

The women in this study use ritual to express their truest form of Zen. Some do so by following traditional Japanese monastic practices while others are looking to express their role as an ordained Soto woman in more personal terms. For example, where some women chose to shave their heads because it is required of them traditionally, or because

Dogen insisted on it, others have chosen not to for various personal reasons, but do not feel that a failure to practice this ritual regularly in any way detracts from their actualization of Zen. Celibacy is another of the monastic traditions where women are reinterpreting the traditional rules. For some, devotion to their practice and *sangha* is first and foremost, so either celibacy came as a result, or a specific vow was made. Others, however, find that their full expression of Zen is found by engaging in the world, including in the roles of wife and mother. For many of these women, such roles are important not only for themselves, but for their students, as a way of showing others how to engage with the world while following Zen principles.

The women in this study expressed their desire to feel a part of the tradition and good about themselves as women, and in many cases, have had to alter some of the language in the liturgy to do so, a practice that, according to religion and culture scholar Lesley Northup (1997) is a common theme among women's ritualizing practices. Where non-gendered Japanese terms were translated into gendered English language pronouns, women have had to either un-gender them or use a gender neutral word like "ancestor" instead of "patriarch." As psychology and women's studies scholars Mary Crawford and Rhoda Unger (2004) note, language is powerful, and continually seeing pronouns or words that do not include a person's own gender can lead to internalized feelings of discrimination. Women have taken this issue head-on by not only changing the androcentric bias in the liturgy, but by creating and chanting a list of female ancestors, comparable to the male lineage chant because, as Northup (1997) explains, naming is a powerful form of female ritualizing. For most of the women in this study and for the men as well, such a chant is an important and welcomed inclusion into the Soto cannon.

Furthermore, the inclusion of female personifications, either in the form of Prajnaparamita or deities like Tara and Kuan Yin allow women the opportunity to celebrate feminine qualities and see a female enlightened form, a kind of role model that they can relate to. Role models are very important. As Mary Daly, a leader in the women's spirituality movement, said, If god is always a man with a beard, where does that leave women? The same is true of *bodhisattavas*. If they are all men, women feel left out, as if their enlightenment is not possible, especially in light of Buddhist writings against women attaining it.

American Soto women further explore the feminine through other non-traditional Soto practices, such as Native American council circles and body work. The council circles fit hand in hand with women's tendency to organize themselves more horizontally and less hierarchically, as well as women's tendency to be more community-oriented, which Northup (1997) found to be another common theme in her research on women and rituals. Similarly, American women tend to work with and ritualize their bodies more than men do, incorporating techniques such as yoga and hands-on healing into their practice, perhaps due in part to the negative images of women's bodies within the tradition.

American Soto women, like their Japanese counterparts, also incorporate activities that revolve around domestic duties, including rites for children, in a sense evoking the role of mother. While some would argue that women should not be defined by biological capabilities such as child bearing, sociologist and anthropologist Susan Starr Sered's work (1994) on matriarchal religions showed that mothering and the mother role was a central theme in those religions. The lives of the women in this study help to illustrate



the fact that though women should not be defined by their childbearing abilities, many ordained women find motherhood to be a fulfilling role in their lives. Incorporating children into the women's ritual lives, even for those women in this study without children, seemed for them a natural expression.

This study found an overlap in the ritual practices of American Soto women with both their Japanese female counterparts and their American male counterparts, leading to the conclusion that the changes occurring in American Soto Zen are not simply the result of feminization, but also of an American syncretism, where a combination of religious elements come together to form a new expression of the religion (Kurtz, 2007). As has happened with many imported religions, Soto in the U.S. has developed an American profile that is informed by the American experience. For instance, using Native American circles speaks to the American tendency toward exploring primordial religions, the focus on gender equity issues reflects elements of the women's spirituality movement, and just the simple fact that people are interested in a Japanese sect of Zen called Soto at all is evidence of American's fascination with the East and Eastern religions. In addition, the fact that American Soto women are changing things to better fit into American men's and women's lives is itself a form of proselytization, and follows in a long line of religions that have been altered to speak to a more American audience.

As a reaction to the recognition of the feminine and syncretic adaptation, American Soto Zen has nurtured a less strict, more gender-inclusive and community-oriented practice that has been referred to as a "softening" in the rituals that have come to, and are being created to, define it. This more inclusive and fluid form of Zen now permeates Soto Zen in the U.S., in part because American men and women practice together. But

Zen priests point out that “softer” does not mean “weaker.” On the contrary, it is a strengthening of the resolve of women to take the practice into their own hands and create a Soto Zen that speaks to them and, by default, to many American practitioners, men included.

Soto Zen Abbess Grace Schireson made the point that there are no images of a female Zen master, only the male “strong and silent type” ([Interview with Schireson], 2010, p. 43). This is changing. Modern American Soto women are the emerging image of American Soto Zen masters. The role models for tomorrow’s Soto practitioners are alive and well in the women who are creating their own path in the American Soto landscape. Therefore, the image of what a female Soto Zen master should look like is varied. Some have shaved heads, while others have short hair. Some are married with children and others are single. Some wear monastic robes and some wear jewelry and makeup. They are as varied as the American landscape from which they emerge, but are all, in their own right, capable role models of American Soto Zen masters.

Just as other traditions like Reform Judaism and yoga have achieved a degree of American uniqueness while maintaining an authenticating union with their original forms, American Soto Zen also prospers as a result of the traceable connection to its Japanese heritage despite its subsequent American syncretization. Furthermore, because of the evolution of the practice in America, it may be, at least in one aspect, the closest it has ever been to one basic tenet of Dogen’s teachings, in that American men and women practice together. In this respect, American practitioners keep closely to the spirit of Dogen’s teachings, if not to the letter. Ultimately, American Soto Zen practitioners hold in high regard the traditional recitation of Soto lineage and the foundational practice of

*zazen*, despite some divergence from the original import. Combined, these consistencies serve to confirm American Soto Zen as a valid expression of Soto Zen.

American Soto Zen, like its dominant symbolic visual representation, the *enso*, is unfinished and evolving. Each *enso* symbolizes and reflects the is-ness and personality of the individual painter—each circle being drawn a little differently—representing a moment in time, unique unto itself, but remaining a recognizable *enso*. Likewise, American Soto Zen reflects the different spirits and personalities of the women involved in its development—the cultural evolution of the practice as it becomes more American—representing this crucial moment when women are participating in and at the forefront of an emerging religious sect, but continuing to resonate with the historical framework of Soto Zen.

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## APPENDIX A

The following participants in this study were interviewed either by phone, Skype, or via email:

- Paula K. R. Arai, Ph.D., Zen scholar, educator, and author
- Rev. Patricia Dai-En Bennage, abbess at Mt. Equity Zendo in Pennsylvania
- Catherine Anraku Hondorp, priest at Village Zendo, New York
- Sensei Meg Levie, priest at Green Gultch Zen Center in California
- Rev. Teijo Munnich, abbess at Great Tree Zen Temple in North Carolina
- Roshi Wendy Egyoku Nakao, abbot and head teacher of Zen Center Los Angeles
- Shotai de la Rosa, head priest of the Daishin Zendo in Florida
- Myoan Grace Schiereson, abbess of the Empty Nest Zendo in California
- Peter Schneider of Beginners Mind Zen Center in California
- Abbott Myogen Steve Stucky of the San Francisco Zen Center
- Julie Kirin Myoko Terestman, priest at Village Zendo, New York
- Ted O'Toole, senior priest in training at Minnesota Zen Mediation Center

## APPENDIX B

Interview questions for this study included:

- Japanese nuns justified their intent as a way to get closer to Dogen's teachings. What is it about rituals in the US that speaks to that same desire?
- Paula Arai explained that the nuns in Nagoya, Japan, are quite concerned with legitimacy and perform rituals to evoke and help establish their legitimacy.
- Since you are an American practicing in the US, how do you feel about legitimacy?
- Does the practice of rituals in the US speak to a desire other than getting closer to Dogen's teachings?
- How do you define the feminine and does it play a role in your practice of Zen?
- Is the exploration of the feminine acceptable in the dogma of Dogen?
- Does Zen have gender?
- How do you use traditional Soto ritual to explore the feminine?
- How do you alter traditional rituals and infuse them with your own meaning?
- What additional ritual is being practiced in American Soto relating to the feminine or feminine aspects?
- What is the reasoning behind creating new rituals or bringing new ones in from other traditions?
- How do you create your own rituals to explore the feminine?

- What are your genderized rituals?
- What does evoking the feminine do for you, the practitioner?
- Are there certain rituals that male priests perform which female priests/  
nuns do not?
- Do you shave your head? Why or why not?
- Have you chosen to be celibate? Why or why not?